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# The Attributes of the Long-Serving Counselling Volunteers in the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong

A critical commentary submitted to the Middlesex University in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctorate of  
Professional Studies

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# Attributes of Long-Serving Counselling Volunteers in the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong: A Critical Commentary

Doctor of Professional Studies

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To be read together with the draft book:

*Towards Wisdom, Long-serving Samaritan Befriender Volunteers in Hong Kong*

In the Attachment

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## Glossary

Annual appraisal	SBHK Hotline volunteers are required to pass an annual appraisal in order to maintain their status as a Hotline worker. The appraisal system generally requires them to obtain 40 scores. However, the requirement for the distribution of the 40 scores varies according to their years of service. Failure at the annual appraisal would initially render the volunteer to fall into a service commitment with a less stringent obligation. It tries to protect volunteers from easily being downgraded to trainee status. Volunteer who fails the service commitment would be downgraded to trainee status. Volunteers would then no longer have the rights as full members. Further failure of a trainee's obligation would lead to termination of membership.
Annual General Meeting (AGM)	Meeting held once a year with all members. It is the highest authority in SBHK.
Annual score	SBHK Hotline volunteers are required to obtain a score of 40 in order to fulfil the minimum attendance requirement. At present, one point represents a continuous two-and-a-half hours of Hotline service. However, this could be replaced by non-Hotline service such as attending meetings or joining other activities of SBHK.
Caring Fund (CARE)	One of the service centre of SBHK, organizing community education service, fundraising and promotional activities for SBHK. It is a self-funding centre.
CBE	Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.
Community Chest of Hong Kong	A funding body in Hong Kong providing a subsidy to social services in Hong Kong.
Crisis Assistant	Hotline volunteers with a certain length of experience might be further trained to be a crisis assistant to assist professional crisis workers (social workers) to handle clients. They might conduct outreach service to meet or interview clients at the centre together with the social workers.
Crisis intervention Centre (SCIC)	One of the service centres of SBHK, using professional social workers to provide a medium-term (6-8 weeks) suicide prevention service to client. The centre is funded by the Social Welfare Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government.
Debriefing	A role of qualified Hotline volunteers, to listen to and support other Hotline volunteers after they have handled a case (by telephone or interview). The purpose of the debriefing is to allow the debriefer to recognize if the volunteer involved was emotionally affected by the handling of the cases; if so, the debriefer needs to provide further support to the volunteer.
Civil Aid Services	A government-owned disciplinary force recruiting volunteers for large-scale civil activities or emergencies, such as crowd

	control at festivals or in the event of flooding.
Dyslexia	Challenges with reading that are unrelated to the level of intelligence. Also referred to in up-to-date literature as in the category of neural diversity.
<i>Epoché</i>	Preparation for deriving new knowledge, and also an experience itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices and pre-suppositions, and allowing things, events and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time. (Moustakas, 1994: 85)
Executive Committee (Exco)	The Board of Directors of SBHK, elected by volunteers every two years at the Annual General Meeting. The committee is the highest decision-making authority of SBHK, apart from any resolution of the General Meeting.
<i>Eudaimonia</i>	As suggested by Aristotle, the ultimate happiness that a human can achieve, which is, at the same, human attainment of the highest wisdom.
Flow (concept of)	A positive psychology term meaning a stage in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sake of doing it. It is the period when we are so concentrated on the task that we do not realize how time is passing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).
GBM	Grant Bauhinia Medal, awarded by Hong Kong SAR Government.
help4suicide	A website of SBHK promoting the suicide prevention message.
Hong Kong Certificate Examination (HKCEE)	A public academic examination for teenagers. Students passing the examination are considered to have graduated from secondary school.
Horizontal grouping	The new system of splitting Hotline volunteers into groups divided by parts of days, such as am, pm, evening and overnight, but without making reference to days of the week. There may be several groups in one period.
Hotline	The first centre established by SBHK in 1960, with a telephone Hotline manned by volunteers around the clock to provide an emotional vent for suicidal clients. The centre is funded by the Community Chest of Hong Kong.
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also referred to as ISIL and Daesh.
Life ambassadors	Trained volunteers serving on a suicide prevention promotional programme. They might assist in fundraising activities or organizing carnivals, etc. They are trained with suicide prevention knowledge and watch out in public for suicidal clients so that earlier interventions can be exercised by qualified



	personnel.
Life Education Centre (LEC)	One of the service centres of SBHK providing life education service in Hong Kong. The centre is funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust as a suicide prevention education project.
Mass Transit Railway (MTR)	Underground rail service connecting the main districts in Hong Kong.
Memorandum and Article (M&A)	The legal document filed with the Company Registrar of the Hong Kong special administrative government, detailing the goal, mission and business coverage of a company. The organizational structure and rights of each kind of member are also addressed in the document.
Neighbourhood Committee	Representatives from tenants of housing or flats in a community join as a committee to handle the living environment issues that they have in common.
Overnight Duty (OND)	A shift of the Hotline service in SBHK from 2300 to 0700 hours of the following day.
Peak experience	According to Maslow, some people who have fulfilled their basic needs, such as survival, security, love, self-esteem, etc., might start to self-actualize with or without some sorts of unexpected strange experience. He called this the peak experience. Most people who have had a peak experience report a kind of joy that they had never experienced. They feel god-like and able to integrate themselves into the universe, which resembles the element of a 'divine' power inside them. Buddhists speak of it as Nirvana, Hindus as enlightenment, or the highest Chakra, and Christians as being suffused by the Holy Spirit.
Practical wisdom ( <i>phronesis</i> )	As suggested by Aristotle, the intrinsic drive to carry out moral virtues as an end that leads to becoming a good man.
Rainbow Group	The full name is 'Rainbow in the Rain'. A group dedicated to suicide victim survivors, aiming to assist the survivors in the bereavement process and then train them to become volunteers to help other survivors with a similar experience.
Royal Hong Kong Regiment	A military force composed of mainly volunteers to back up the Hong Kong government, in the event that the normal disciplinary forces such as the police and fire service are not sufficient to handle internal security issues in Hong Kong.
Role-play facilitator	The training of Hotline volunteers involves role-play sessions in which trainees have to try to apply the learned skill on a pseudo-client acted by other trainees or other volunteers. The role-play facilitator is assigned to provide comments to the trainees on how they performed.

Samaritans, Multilingual Service	One of suicide prevention telephone hotline services in Hong Kong providing an English, Cantonese, Putonghua service for society.
Samaritan Befriender Hong Kong (SBHK)	A non-government organization established to provide a suicide prevention service in Hong Kong.
Samaritans Beyond	A group of Hotline volunteers voluntarily committed to carrying out extra overnight duties, on top of their normal duty obligations.
Social Welfare Department	One of the government departments of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, handling social welfare matters in Hong Kong.
Suicide Prevention On internet' (SPOT)	A suicide prevention service that searches for negative wordings in posts on the internet social platforms in order to locate possible suicidal clients and then engage them with suicide prevention counselling.
Theoretical Wisdom	As suggested by Aristotle, the potential drive for humans to carry out moral virtues or practical virtues as a means by which to lead to becoming a wise man who understands what is the ultimate human happiness ( <i>eudaimonia</i> ).
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.
Vertical grouping	The old system of splitting Hotline volunteers into seven groups according to the day of the week such as Monday, Tuesday, etc.
Volunteer number	The identity number assigned to Hotline volunteers when they start receiving live calls. At most, volunteers can provide only their surname and volunteer number to clients for identification. They cannot give their full name to clients.

## **Abstract**

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) was established in 1960. It provides an around-the-clock telephone hotline service, using volunteers as para-counsellors to help people who are in emotional distress and have suicidal thoughts. There are currently more than 200 volunteers. This aim of this research is to explore the reasons for the great length of time that some volunteers have served. This emerged from my intention to publish a book about volunteering in SBHK to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2010.

This is a piece of autoethnographic research, as I am one of those long-serving volunteers. Through this research approach, I was able to capture my own lived experience (auto) of the Samaritan culture in Hong Kong where I am a member and those of ten long-serving Samaritans as well as our executive work, which constitute the 'ethno' aspect of this culture. The 'graphy' is the pulling together of my interactive knowledge and understanding of my organization in order to deepen my own understanding and practice and, as a member of the executive, influence policies to best support retention and longevity, as experience is built up over time in a particular system of cultural practices that take place at the interface of life and death. It is a value-imbued environment that focuses on contributing to the health of the community in which it is situated and attending to members of the community who have become marginalized or isolated for a variety of reasons, from personal to socio-political. Through an analysis of our practice and the experiences of eleven long-serving volunteers, insights were developed into why so many volunteers have remained in this mini-culture for so long, working and regularly continuing their professional and personal skills development.

The retention factors identified in the volunteers are, in general, compatible with other research on long-serving volunteers in other parts of the world. The findings highlighted a general commitment to helping others, influenced by a range of factors, including past experience in connection with other suicide cases or specific childhood experiences, which had drawn their attention towards ways of helping others. There were incidences of a 'self-oriented motive'; that is, taking advantage of the service for

knowledge seeking or improvement in communication skills. However, satisfaction of these needs did not result in them leaving the service, as some literature has recorded.

Factors relating to the practices of the organization that enhance retention include belonging to a reputable organization, satisfaction in handling cases successfully, bonding with other volunteers and taking on management roles.

This is an autoethnographic piece of work and, as the researcher, I sought to improve my own thinking and practice through this research of my 'culture' and practice, deepening my understanding, as I also have the role of maintaining or developing such practice as a director of SBHK. This research therefore shares the insights gained by looking deeply into a system of which one is a member and seeking to understand it and its role, and using wider knowledge to reflect on our own. My exploration took me into areas including criteria of resilience, questioning what wisdom is and how it is reached, and drawing on the wider cultural systems of the Asia Pacific region, including Buddhism and the concept of 'selflessness', as a step towards wisdom.

# **Chapter 1 Introduction and Background**

## **1.1 The history of the Samaritan Befrienders, Hong Kong**

The Samaritans is an organization that was set up in the United Kingdom in 1953 by a priest, Chad Varah, who was dedicated to serving people with suicidal ideation. It provides a conversational support service to prevent people from committing suicide (Varah, 1973). The setting up of the first Samaritans in UK was triggered by news of three suicide cases in Great London on a summer's day in 1953. He was impulsive and began to offer his personal help by making it known to the press on 2 November 1953 that people contemplating suicide were invited to telephone him at MANsion House 9000, which was the phone coding system at the time. His service was later assisted by some other kind-hearted lay people. He then discovered the importance of a befriending service that could complement professional counselling or psychiatric treatment (ibid.)

His service started to attract attention from different places within and outside the United Kingdom. Starting in early 1954, he received plenty of inquiries from Greece, Switzerland, West Germany, Denmark, and even Havana in Cuba, on the service. Very soon, the Samaritan's hotline service was spreading into different part of the world (ibid.).

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) was set up in 1960 as 'The Suicide Prevention Society'. It was the first suicide prevention telephone hotline in Asia. In 1963, SBHK was registered as a society in Hong Kong, and was renamed 'The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong' (SBHK, 2008).

SBHK was established by Mr Andrew Tu and Mrs Elsie Hume Ellio Tu, GBM. They organized a group of volunteers who were mainly primary schoolteachers of the then Mu Kuang English School. It was not certain what motivated Mr Tu to establish the service. He set up the service at his home before a centre at Lo Fu Ngam Resettlement Estate in Kowloon was granted to the service.

Due to a major increase in student suicides as a result of setbacks in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in 1964, SBHK launched a Summer Hotline Service for the Form 5 graduates in 1965 (SBHK, 2006). HKCEE was the public examination taken by students at the age of about 17. Only those students who passed HKCEE with flying colours had the chance to study for a further two more years (matriculation classes) before they took another examination for a place at the limited number of universities. Those who only had average results in HKCEE were considered to have passed HKCEE, but would not have the opportunity for tertiary education in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the HKCEE provided them with a certificate of academic attainment so that they could secure a white-collar job in society. Those who failed would have to be factory workers or customer service providers. Therefore, students were under immense pressure to obtain good results.

Volunteers reported for extra duty around the clock for a few days before and after the announcement of the HKCEE results. More than ten extra telephone lines were added to cope with the influx of calls from the desperate graduates. In parallel with the extra hotline, a group of volunteers formed a publishing team to collect information from schools and put out a special handbook for the graduates every year. The handbook contained the latest information on the average school acceptance criteria, providing an easy reference for graduates.

In the 1970s, SBHK offered services in Chinese and in English by two different units. The English service unit was once run separately from a hut in Princess Margaret Road and then moved to Wanchai. The Chinese service remained in Lo Fu Ngam Resettlement Estate (later rebuilt as Lok Fu Estate). SBHK was a member of the Befrienders International (Samaritan Worldwide) until 1982, when the English service was unlinked from SBHK. In most annual reports of SBHK before 1982, the twenty principles of Samaritan Befrienders were published (SBHK, 1971-1975). Some of the principles remain as tacit rules of the present SBHK. Mr and Mrs Tu continued the English service by establishing another organization, named 'The Samaritans', which became 'The Samaritans Multilingual service' of today.

## **1.2 Start of the research**

I have been serving at the SBHK since 1983 as a Hotline volunteer. Volunteers answer telephone calls from the underprivileged or depressed citizens of Hong Kong. Volunteers listen to callers' distress and narratives, and their thoughts and reasons for considering suicide to be the only option. Both the training process and the service commitment of the Hotline volunteers are demanding. A summary of the Hotline volunteer training schedule and syllabus can be found in Appendix 1. At present, there are over 200 volunteers serving at SBHK (SBHK Annual Report, 2013).

SBHK has been serving Hong Kong for over fifty years, and there are a number of volunteers who have been serving it for more than twenty years. Given the demanding nature of the work, which might involve the life or death of a client, the dedication of these long-serving volunteers seems extraordinary. In 2009, while SBHK was planning to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2010, I thought about writing a book about these long-serving volunteers in appreciation of their efforts in contributing continuously to suicide prevention work in SBHK. I wanted to provide a formal historical record of how SBHK has been serving Hong Kong for half a century and how the 'unique' volunteerism in SBHK has survived and continues to draw volunteers to this challenging work. Many things were overtaken by events. I was not able to complete the writing in 2010, to align with the anniversary year. The element of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary is no longer important. However, the publication of the book about the volunteers of SBHK remains unchanged.

I have said 'unique', from a position of knowledge and experience of this organization. I am one of those long-serving volunteers of SBHK myself, and understand the operation well through the volunteers. Volunteers not only serve on the frontline to provide the Hotline service. They also serve as the management personnel of the organization and are responsible for its day-to-day running and development. This organizational structure has evolved over the past five decades, as it responds to increases in suicides and suicidal ideation within the contexts of shifting sociocultural climates and rapid change.

The idea of writing the book later merged with my desire to obtain a doctoral degree by researching the lives of counselling volunteers. Serving in SBHK was not my career. It was voluntary service that I undertook throughout my life. However, 60 per cent of my life has been with SBHK. I am aware how much this work has had an impact on my personal development, but I am also aware that the impact might not be the same for other volunteers. In looking at the optimum conditions for the retention and development of self and one's skills in supporting other people at critical points in their lives, I began to think that it would be important to explore the experiences of long-serving volunteers from an insider perspective, exploring my relationship with my environment through a narrative approach, as suggested by Holloway and Jefferson (2000). In this approach, there is a shared experience between the researcher and the participants, but each narrative will be unique to the individual, thereby requiring a framing within the discourses of phenomenology (Kockelmans, 1967; Roth, 2012).

The term autoethnography invokes the self or personal experience (*auto*), culture (*ethno*) and writing or systematic analysis (*graphy*) (Ellis, 2004). It is when we study and write about culture from perspective of the self, when we look *inward* into our identities, thoughts, feelings and experiences and *outward* into our relationships, communities and cultures. It is a process of taking readers through the same, back and forth, inside and out (Jones, 2001).

Since SBHK puts a great deal of effort and resources into volunteer training, retention is an important issue. Along with constantly feeding good practice into training and expanding on knowledge, a substantial amount of investment is spent on training individuals who then leave within a short period of time. I hope that the research and the book will provide a historical account of the development of SBHK over the past fifty years and provide some insights into the attributes of long-serving volunteers in the organization.

With the encouragement of volunteerism all over the world, such information could be helpful for other organizations wishing to retain their volunteers for a longer term of service. In fact, there is a growing amount of research on volunteerism all over the world, as society and governments have turned to NGOs to deal with chronic issues.



Health and well-being are usually among the first to be cut back during an economic crisis. There are items in professional publications, mission statements and news media, nationally and internationally. There are regular accounts on the value of volunteers in supporting society's health and community needs. Rifkin (1996) stated that with the shrinking financial support from the government or from the society, inviting more volunteers' involvement could be a potential community resource. In fact, it is found that Americans are volunteering less frequently and are highly selective in their service (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow, 1996 in Mesch, et al., 1998: 18). Some publications are local (Nathanson and Eggleton, 1993; Omoto and Snyder, 1993; Sherrott, 1983) and national-based case studies (Wofford et al., 1996), and others make links between belief systems and volunteering (Scheepers, Grotenhuis and Reitsma, 2006). There is a small number of articles on volunteerism in Hong Kong (Agency for Voluntary Service, 2009), but none specifically on the Samaritans.

The book (draft) that I am presenting is not academic in principle, but it still carries some references for readers who wish to pursue an area mentioned, especially in the last two chapters where the conclusion of the research is summarized for the benefit of similar organizations that wish to explore ideas on fostering long-serving volunteers. However, it is still a vehicle for the public to have a more personal understanding of the work that volunteers undertake through the kind of people who work there and as data for my own striving both to understand and gain learning from my service years, and to gain insights into myself and my practice. The rationale, methodology, analysis, critical engagement with me and my environment and my learning are contained in this document.

My research took place in the Hong Kong context. Its findings are primarily appropriate to this context. However, I hope that they will also have something to offer the field of volunteerism generally, although it is, to a certain extent, based on the understanding of the volunteers' background knowledge of their own context and how they understand what influences their volunteering commitment and practice over such a long period of time. My question was, through critically reflecting on and articulating the stories, would any attributes be revealed that could account for their commitment, survival, optimism and skill in this area of practice.

My belief in the value of voluntary work has influenced and now underpins a strong social constructivist view of the world. This also influences my interpretation and analysis of the data collected. I subscribe to Denzin's notion of the "hermeneutical circle" (2001: 43) of the interpretative process, in that it is endless and, as will be demonstrated in this case, the data is bound, itself, as will be explained later in the work. Holloway and Jefferson's case study (2000: 4) on a narrative approach was helpful in the articulation of what I had in mind to do with the storytellers and why I believed their stories were the way to support my autoethnographical study:

*"...whose inner world is not simply a reflection of the outer world nor a cognitively driven rational accommodation to it. Rather we intend to argue for the need to posit research subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and where experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner world allows them to experience the outer world. The research subject cannot be known except through another subject; in this case the researcher."* (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000: 3)

The data is conveyed in the first person by participants, as the memory of their motivation, choices and recalls are subjective. It was my role as a researcher first to provide a space and time and approach for participants to speak freely, then to extract learning from the data to contribute to my own learning about the culture of SBHK, and to contribute to knowledge in the field of practice. I achieved this construction of knowledge and understanding through social interpretation.

One assumption that I made before carrying out the research is that long service by volunteers is neither pathological nor unhealthy. I believe that there were positive interactions or relationships between volunteers and clients that fostered their long stay. However, my awareness of that assumption helped me to be open to what the data might reveal.

### **1.3 My position on retention factors for volunteers**

A number of previous social research studies have focused on the performance of a given service, specific to particular mental health issues such as depression or dementia. Suicide does not fall easily into specific mental health categories. Researches that focused on the characteristics of successful volunteers in the third

sector are not uncommon. For instance, Handy et al. found that long-term committed volunteers were more 'other-oriented' than 'self-oriented' (Handy, Brodeur and Cnaan, 2006) and Chacón, Vecina and Dávila (2007) discovered that the satisfaction level was more important than commitment in influencing retention. It was especially the situation for the novice volunteers (Chacón et al., 2007). Despite a slight discrepancy in research findings, Hyde, Dunn, Bax and Chamber (2016) concluded that the key factors in encouraging retention of volunteers are promoting satisfaction, social connections and organizational commitment. Organizations such as SBHK that are constituted of people, volunteers of the third sector in this case, who have served for over twenty to thirty years, are comparatively rare. It is part of my wish to provide a creative platform for academics to explore more deeply hotline volunteerism in the third sector.

As an insider of SBHK, in particular one of these long-serving volunteers, it was important for me to communicate from not only that insider's perspective what the infrastructure is but how it came into being. In my existing role, I want to know if the infrastructure supports or inhibits retention and how the infrastructure can be developed to address any issue arising from this particular issue. My research, then, really begins with looking at what the factors are at play in retaining our long-serving members.

Again, as an insider who understands the key-working culture of the organization, I have a particular personal view of the retention of volunteers that is influenced by the nature of the work of SBHK. I am not sure to what extent this is shared by other volunteers. I know people who carry out voluntary work regularly. They might serve as helping hands for charity events, sports or the church; they use their spare time to help charity organizations to carry out some work which is generally within their comfort zone and capability. These voluntary activities are often project based, which might not touch on human emotions, let alone life or death situations. There are also volunteers who are drawn to specific and often distressing voluntary work that is linked to the loss or impending loss of a loved one, for example from cancer, multiple sclerosis or a brain injury. Each time I am travelling to the Hotline service, especially when I take public transport to report for overnight duty, I find myself observing those people around me. There are questions in my mind and I keep guessing their

destination. Are they going home to relax, or to look after a sick child or parent? Are they going out to a gathering, entertainment or volunteering? When I turn my mind back to where I am travelling, I have a feeling of satisfaction. I get so much back from making an effort to help people through the Hotline. I do not feel that it is a sacrifice because I have learned so much. I experience a feeling of being trusted with the pain and disclosures. I am passionate about providing counselling services to people who are depressed to the extent of feeling suicidal or, indeed, are actively planning to end their lives. I believe that each life is precious and is full of often hidden potential. When I see volunteers working tirelessly and non-judgmentally, I cannot help but experience them as selfless, kind, committed people, even altruistic. It is double giving: giving time as volunteer and giving time to this particular kind of volunteering. I am curious about this type of giving; to me, it has a deep value that transcends the general social culture of seeking comfortable lives or even the norms of volunteering.

This curiosity has continuously enlightened and informed my overall personal practice and organization of my worldview. It informs me of the possibility of a more idealistic life that is different from the lives of people who focus solely on their well-beings or advancements in the society. In fact, it also guides my reading of the appreciation of good attitudes for life, rather than obtaining popular recognition, whatever that might be, depending on the cultural context. My curiosity has led me to think about a state that transcends cultural differences bounded by place and time and that links to universal values of humanity that transcend such boundaries. I recognize now that I would rather look for universal truth and wisdom that transcend culture than that which is outstanding in our cultural norms of behaviour.

This became heightened after a particular personal experience in late 2013. My views on the importance of selflessness in life became the focus of my research and my development of observation. This has a causal connection with the search criteria of my subsequent selection of literature on wisdom. It has a causal link to my final view of the importance of practising 'selflessness' in relation to the regular exercise of empathy with clients, which in some sense invokes people to attribute to such individuals the quality of wisdom. This echoes Aristotle's discussion on the exercise of *phronesis* (practical wisdom or moral insight) and *sophia* (theoretical wisdom), in the

form of virtue that might lead to *eudaimonia* (the highest state of human happiness) (Cooper, 2012). I look at this in more detail later in this work.

## Chapter 2 The Research Project

### 2.1 A positive approach

The SBHK established its 24-hour telephone hotline service in 1960. It was the first of its kind in Hong Kong or even Asia to provide a 24-hour suicide prevention telephone hotline service. During the first ten years, the service was manned by a group of primary schoolteachers who devoted their spare time to helping those people with emotional distress. In about 1970, SBHK started to recruit other volunteers to complement the service. I have served SBHK as a Hotline volunteer since 1983. However, there are some volunteers who have been serving SBHK for even longer. In 2013, there are about 208 volunteers in SBHK and a quarter of them (36%) have served for more than ten years (SBHK Annual Report, 2013: 18). See Table 1 below:

**Table 1 Years of service of SBHK volunteers in 2013**

Years of Service	Male	Female
Below 1 year	17	16
2-3 years	10	26
4-5 years	9	18
6-7 years	8	12
8-9 Years	5	12
Above 10 years	30	45
Total	79	129

According to my count in 2011, over twenty of them have served for between 20 and 35 years. Volunteers have different roles, ranging from frontline telephone helpers to management board directors. That means that both the daily operations and long-term development of SBHK depend on the commitment of these volunteers.

Being part of the long-serving team, I have experienced 'ups and downs' in emotion and fluctuations in my commitment to stay or leave SBHK. However, my commitment to helping people with suicidal thoughts or intentions or emotional distress has never faded. I took the first Master of Arts in Work Based Learning (Counselling Studies) course run by SBHK and Middlesex University in 2007 and graduated in 2009. The course was one of the factors that supported my retention and gave me a direction as to how my commitment could be further developed through more acquisition of counselling skills and the importance of conducting reliable research to produce evidence-based practice and knowledge. Looking back, I think that some of the lows were a sign of 'burn-out'. I can say that the following description would describe my state at certain times. I believe the counselling course helped me to regain my energy and engagement.

*"'Burn-out' refers to the draining of energy. It likes the smothering of a fire or the extinguishing of a candle. Once a fire is burning, it cannot continue burning brightly unless there are sufficient fuel sources that keep being replenished. Over time, employees experiencing burn-out lose the capacity to provide the intense contributions that make an impact. If they continue working, the result is more a smouldering – uneventful and inconsequential – than burning. From their own perspective or that of others, they accomplish less." (Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach, 2008: 205).*

After the obtaining the Master Degree, I participated in further professional training on Positive Psychology Counselling run by the St John Counselling Services, Hong Kong. As positive psychology also advocates evidence-based practice, it merged well with my desire for personal development. In particular, positive psychology calls for increasing research on factors of happiness or well-being, rather than the constant mining of a pathological approach to depression or other mental disorders (Snyder and Lopez, 2002). This is one of reasons why I wanted to act as a conduit for the voices of the volunteers who appeared to have a positive attitude to life and to those intending suicide.

## **2.2 Research project**

I wished to conduct an autoethnographical study on my experiences as a long-serving volunteer in the practice culture of SBHK. This study is enriched by more ethnographical cultural data from the narratives of ten other volunteers on their experiences of long service in the same practice culture, but each having their own individual practice informed by life experiences that have shaped them and which constitute their motivation. Their stories provide additional and more in-depth information of the culture being studied. Hence, the study indirectly covers the loyalty of another ten volunteers and directly of mine from three perspectives: namely their past, present and future. It is also supported by research into the Samaritans' history and relevant literature. These data sets triangulate my experience, international literature, the history of Samaritans in Hong Kong and the individual experiences of the ten volunteers to share insight into the reasons for retention of volunteers and to inform my own practice and my subsequent contributions to the future of SBHK. An exploration of the past of the volunteers is to form an understanding of how their childhood or upbringing affected their motivation to stay in SBHK. An examination of the present is to focus on their current environmental circumstances, such as their present life and the culture of SBHK, to see if there is any correlation between their lives and their long-serving behaviour. The third area of research is to see if volunteers have been serving SBHK to search for or to accomplish any other goal(s). I imagine that some may seek to find some kinds of satisfaction of their needs, happiness, a meaningful life or other unique goals for that individual. This comprises an area of the future development or expectations of volunteers.

Since I am studying the reasons behind a fact – that is, that those volunteers are long-serving in the organization – these reasons can be taken as possible driving forces to sustain their persistence and support their continuation over a long period of time. I chose to title the project *The Attributes of Long-Serving Counselling Volunteers in the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong* because, as an autoethnographic researcher, I intuitively understand from my observations inside the organization over many years that there are certainly some drivers that motivate volunteers to serve continuously the same organization for most of their lifetime. I believe that the past experience of volunteers – whether as an individual or within the service, their present life



experience whether personal or organizational within SBHK, and their expectations for the future and the nature of the service, namely telephone counselling – constitute a culture for the organization in which everyone finds an identity and belonging, in addition to what they have outside the organization. The cohesion of the culture is through a common set of values. This starts with wanting to do something to help their community to survive and thrive.

My research, then, is to check what my observations have been indicating through actively inviting colleagues to participate in my exploration. This thereby also helps me to engage more critically in our practice culture to see if this not only helps us but produces something that is transferable to others, including what the indicators might be for sustaining relevant practices and retaining experienced practitioners.

I have attempted to transform our tacit experience into explicit knowledge for the benefit of the service and those both in it and who access it, through the device of first-person storytelling.

After the initial collection of and immersion in the narratives of the ten volunteers, I encountered what Gurdjieff and James called a mystical experience (Speeth, 1989, James, 1901), an illumination or heightened realization of something in alignment with what Maslow called peak experience (Maslow, 1968). This experience strongly reinforced me to introduce my own particular view on volunteering in SBHK as autoethnographic data.

### **2.3 Professionalism in volunteering**

It sounds contradictory to use the term ‘professional’ in the context of a volunteer organization. Professionals generally refer to any occupation that is basically self-governing and involves knowledge at or above the level of a higher education diploma. Such an occupation might possess their traditions of autonomy, ethics and the ability for independent judgement (Hoyle and John, 1995; Lester, 2014). SBHK is not something like a volunteer group formed in the Law Society, where a number of legal professionals group together to provide voluntary legal service to the public. Instead, SBHK recruits its volunteers from all walks of life. SBHK selects people with the

appropriate caring and listening attributes and potential to harness these attributes into skills through in-house training, so that they can support clients having emotional problems and suicidal ideation while protecting them from vicarious trauma.

In this format, SBHK has been running a suicide prevention hotline for over fifty years in Hong Kong. The Hotline is funded by the Community Chest of Hong Kong, which is one of the largest charitable funding organizations in Hong Kong. The Community Chest requires in return evidence of accountability, good practice and ethical behaviour. In the eyes of the funder, there is no difference between organizations using paid professional social workers or practitioners, or unpaid volunteers. It is the same professional standard that it is looking for. What they look at to consider the continuous provision of funding are the service products.

On the other hand, as a suicide prevention agency, our volunteers have to support people with extreme emotional disturbance. It is not an easy task for volunteers to achieve and for SBHK to maintain their standards. As the nature of the job involves saving lives, it demands some kind of professionalism in managing clients' emotions. The demand for skilful and mature volunteers to handle critical cases is always there. This is why the training is so important. It is wonderful to care and to want to help but, as an organization, we have the role of ensuring that skills are developed to a professional level.

Over the years, the Hotline has only been manned by trained volunteers. The volunteers are trained by experienced volunteers. Therefore, it could be argued that experienced volunteers are a crucial element in our being able to offer a professional service. At the same time, experienced volunteers are also considered to be those who are still in practice, making the workload and responsibilities of such volunteers demanding as they are on the frontline, as well as trainers and managers. Hence, not every volunteer can maintain such a commitment in the long term. The long-service volunteers demonstrate to a certain extent some kind of persistence or perseverance that is discussed more fully further on in this commentary.

Long-serving volunteers provide a reliable and continuous succession plan within the organization. Such succession is not limited to the service level of how past experience

and listening skills and other skills can be passed on from the senior volunteers to the younger generation of volunteers. It also covers how experienced volunteers provide a role model for newer ones to follow. Apart from serving skills, their positive attitude towards being Hotline volunteers is an important element. It inspires confidence and opens up to others a model of what it is possible to contribute to a better society through our own agency, and how this is not something that we do alone, as we have the friendship and support of like-minded people.

Being one of the long-serving volunteers, I am able to explore my motivation behind maintaining a long-term commitment to active service, which can influence my perceptions of the motivations of others. This project has acted to check my perceptions. Depending on the findings, there is potential for the management of volunteer organizations to gain something from any insights, which can contribute to cultivating the environment to enhance the loyalty, commitment, retention and succession of volunteers.

Apart from my volunteer status, I have been one of the directors of SBHK over the past ten years and, as such, I am a member of the executive committee. This directorship encouraged me to look into suicide prevention work and SBHK from a wider perspective. Ten years ago, the executive committee only managed the volunteers of the Hotline. From 2000 onwards, SBHK progressively set up the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC), Life Education Centre (LEC) and Caring Funds (CARE). These three centres provide other kinds of suicide prevention services in Hong Kong.

The executive committee now manages and supervises forty professional social workers who provide a professional suicide crisis intervention service, as well as life education talks and activities. The financial subsidies to SBHK have been bolstered from HK\$1 million to HK\$5 million per year. The SCIC is now a subvention service of the Social Welfare Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government. All these developments clearly indicate that SBHK is no longer just a volunteer organization. It is a professional body in Hong Kong, providing a professional suicide prevention service by both paid social workers and unpaid volunteers. Every

aspect of the organization needs to demonstrate professionalism and adhere to professional standards.

As a director of SBHK, this research provides me with an opportunity to address the human resource issue. I hope that the results of this research will provide some insights into our volunteer recruitment and indirectly address the turnover issue. It is important to note that long-serving volunteers not only influence the Hotline, but also affect the stability of the overall management of SBHK. Thus, they affect the other service centres and the employment of staff in SBHK.

The specific professionalism in the volunteerism of SBHK deserves professional and academic scrutiny of its key component, namely the volunteers and, in particular, long-serving volunteers. The research provides a good opportunity to find out the reasons for the culture that nurtures long-lasting membership.

#### **2.4 Insider – researcher**

I have several roles in this project. Figure 1 below summarizes the role conflicts of the insider–researcher. First, I have been serving SBHK for over thirty years. The main challenge for me has been to put aside my own view. I knew my view might influence my questions to participants, so I kept the questions simple and respectful. In the interpretation of the data, my own personal and professional lens is one of the interpretative approaches that I cannot void when interpreting the data. However, I reserve the chance that there might be discrepancy of my view against others' where the latter might be more supported by relevant literature. In the resource materials for this doctoral programme it states that, within a work-based project, as insider–researcher I could write myself into the research and show, rather than hide, my influence on what I am reporting. This high-reflexivity approach eliminates much of concern on this role conflict. In addition, my choice of eliciting narratives from my colleagues and myself without interference into what they wanted to say has gone some way to mitigating a possible power dynamic and the objectification of colleagues.



**Figure 1 Resolving role conflicts of insider-researchers**

My second role in the project is as a director of SBHK. There is a role conflict between this position and a researcher, if I write a book for SBHK. As a director, I ought to pack the good things for publication; while as a researcher, I should be neutral but critical in generating or handling research data and conclusions. Such ‘actor – observer’ conflict has to be addressed by justifying my methodology throughout the research.

I can think of two ways in which to tackle the problem of criticality in the data analysis stage and at the stage for writing the conclusion, recommendations and the book: self-discipline and seeking external comment. Self-discipline means to keep reminding myself of the need for objectivity and adherence to the methodology, as far as possible. Seeking external comment means listening to comments from others, such as a programme advisor or any external commentator that the University employs for the project.

The third role of the project as a researcher in SBHK does not pose much tension for me, as the research does not touch on the live operation of the organization. There is no direct external connection to clients of SBHK or through the volunteers (participants). The research was focused on the volunteers, and I would not ask volunteers to disclose details about clients. The participants of this research were volunteers both in terms of wanting to engage in the research and as volunteers of

SBHK, so I had no authority over their employment or their position. This reduced any possibility of a power dynamic between the participants and me. The conversations I would like to have with them to illuminate my own practice and understanding of our common serving culture would be conducted neither during their duty time nor at the Hotline centre. A sample of the email request for participation in the research may be found in Appendix 1. All participants would have the opportunity to see the translation of the conversations, shaped into accounts.

## **2.5 Purpose**

The overall purpose of this research is to contribute to the knowledge and practice in organizations in the voluntary sector that undertake work that is related to death and dying and that depend on the experience of long-serving volunteers. I am particularly interested in contributing to empirical data on the positive elements of human behaviour, namely the perseverance of such volunteers.

The aim of this particular project is to deepen my understanding of my own organization and my influence on it and on its members, and their influence on me. Through this understanding I can become a more enlightened practitioner and senior manager. It is also the aim of this project in some way to honour the work of long-serving volunteers, personally and professionally. For me, long-serving volunteers are crucial to this understanding. First, they are part of this research; those who help me to deepen my understanding of why and what they do will contribute to insights on how to develop long-serving volunteers to sustain and develop the culture. It continually makes it more relevant to those who seek our help against a backdrop of rapidly changing societal factors. I hope that such a sincere approach will encourage participants to enjoy in-depth reflection and to share their thinking. Secondly, this approach is about a collaboration of stories, of how the personal is social, how no story is unique and all stories emerge from our encounters with others. Not everything in a personal story will resonate with those of others, but much will. The author of the story is also the co-storyteller, in order to empathize and encourage others to have a perspective of feeling resonant with the story, and that the stories matter to them and to us (Ellis and Rawicki, 2013).

An autoethnographic approach not only allows me to include my own personal and professional experience in a transparent fashion. In addition, it allows me to look critically and openly at my environment as a culture of beliefs and practices, what those beliefs and practices are, the purpose of this system of beliefs and practices, my role in them and their influence on me, and a focus on one particular group in that culture whose members are responsible for passing on or developing the beliefs and systems of that culture. Autoethnography embraces the advantages of an insider-researcher, rather than one who is 'parachuted' in as an outsider observer. That approach may have its place, but for the purposes of this research and to help me to support development in my own organization, I can have a level of engagement with myself as well as with my organization that, together, can help bring about change from within. Further explanation of autoethnography may be found in Chapter 4.

## **2.6 Objectives**

To achieve the research and practical aims, I had to carry out the research in a way that made the findings reliable. Fundamental to achieving this was the choice of methodology, and I chose one that made transparent the role of the researcher and researcher bias, but also harnessed the experience of the researcher as a member of the group being researched and the insider knowledge of the people and the organization. Such **objectives** include:

- a) Obtaining in-depth cultural information by using guided conversation with ten other volunteers by creating the space for them to talk about the individual and organizational factors (past, present and future) that have affected their decisions to stay.
- b) Using literature to compare and contrast the application of organizational factors reported by the ten volunteers and the researcher that foster long service by volunteers.
- c) Checking with literature and volunteers' narratives to see if the nature of the service contributes to long service.

- d) Using all the data collected to compare and contrast the influence of various factors and identify any prerequisites that enhance the nurturing of long-serving Hotline volunteers.
- e) Learning from the insights of the researcher and other volunteers the experience over time in suicide prevention.

My hope, before completing the project, was a clear understanding of the various factors that affect the retention of the volunteers could be obtained. I believe that it has.

## **2.7 Outcomes**

The potential learning outcome for my professional practice development would be a more skilled application of contemporary psychological approaches to enhance understanding of what is good in a person or enhances goodness, rather than a focus on negative or 'pathological' behaviours, when it comes to those people who wish to take their own lives.

For my colleagues and for my organization, an outcome is to think of ourselves more as a learning organization, that research matters in helping all of us to improve our working environment in terms of infrastructure, training and developing a community where we can all thrive and support each other. This is a powerful foundation on which to stand steady when we are supporting members of our wider communities at the interface of living and dying. For many of our callers, it is loneliness that can lead to suicide. We can support them to network, just as we have to attend to this in our volunteer community. A learning organization is developed through increased self-reflection and awareness of all the members of that organization and creating the conditions for learning to take place.

Hence, as mentioned by Schon (1973: 28), we need to be competent at learning, create and develop organization with a learning system which can be adjusted or self-transform in response to the changing environment and requirements.

In practical terms, the project aims to provide documentation in the form of a draft book dedicated to SBHK, to record its findings. Subject to the availability of any



publisher or funding, the book will be published for the benefit of a number of audiences: participants, other volunteers in SBHK, the general public and volunteer organizations in the region and perhaps other parts of the world where the Samaritans or similar organizations operate. Using the Hong Kong experience, it will show how organizational longevity has been contributed to by long-serving volunteers and the management policies adopted in the light of this knowledge. The book would also be a token of appreciation to volunteers for their efforts over the past decades to sustain the service of SBHK and provide insight into volunteerism for the public at large, rather than just a storytelling book. More importantly, in retrospect, it is for the general public to understand how meaningful human life is to the volunteers and how much they value all life.

## **Chapter 3 Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The rationale for my selection started out being based on my professional experiences and training in suicide prevention and counselling, and an exploration of how I might approach the research in a way that was sensitive and would include my own observations as an insider. Some of my training had direct links and others, such as mindfulness, were ways to manage the types of presentation from clients whom volunteers engage with on a regular basis. My literature choices therefore include methodologies from positive psychology, volunteering, counselling and experiences from other commentators about the NGO sector. As I became immersed in the research project and in interpreting the findings, I accessed literature that might answer my questions and/or would enhance my understanding of what I was experiencing and observing. These included existential psychology, meaning making, wisdom and transcending culturally held beliefs to reach indicators of common humanity.

### **3.1 Organizational retention factors**

Volunteer service, sometimes referred as the third sector, is one of major workforces in the modern world. Many activities in the modern world cannot be carried out smoothly or cost effectively without the involvement of volunteer services. To name a few, short-term activities such as the Olympic Games, organized every four years, involve a large number of international volunteers who come from all parts of the world. Another is a one-off sporting event such as the Hong Kong Chartered Marathon or any international triathlon race, which also need the assistance of volunteers. Some volunteers are involved in more long-term services, such as the Samaritan Hotline or the UNICEF.

Although there are not many research studies or publications dedicated to suicide prevention volunteers, there are many others in the world that explored the element

of retention for episodic volunteers. These studies were considered to be relevant to the long service of volunteers.

### 3.1.1 Hyde's EVER model on retention

Hyde et al. (2016) proposed the Episodic Volunteer Engagement and Retention (EVER) model. This was generated after considering the Volunteer Process Model and the three-stage model for volunteering. It covers three stages of volunteering, namely the novice stage, transition stage and the sustained stage. It covers the essential determining factors of retention *"at 3 time-points in their experience: Novice Episodic Volunteer (EVs) (volunteered for the first time), Transition EVs (volunteered sporadically for 2-4 years), and Sustained EVs (volunteered 5 or 6 years consecutively"* (Hyde et al, 2016: 47). Having said that, the model does not say anything about the retention factors for volunteers who serve for twenty years or more.

Hyde et al further stated that *"Motives, social norm, and satisfaction predict Novice EV intentions to continue volunteering; psychological sense of community, satisfaction, and organizational commitment predict Transition EV intentions to continue volunteering; and social norm, psychological sense of community, satisfaction and organizational commitment predict Sustained EV intentions to continue volunteering"* (ibid: 59).

In fact, Hyde's findings are in disagreement with Handy's (Handy et al., 2006), that 'long-term committed' volunteers and habitual volunteers had more other-oriented than self-oriented motives. However, Hyde considered that this might be due to the unique volunteering setting. These elements, of whether volunteer were other-oriented or self-oriented, appear to be relevant to my current research. It would be interesting to know if saving another's life through a suicide prevention hotline is an other-oriented motive, purely for the well-being of others, or is a self-oriented motive, seeking self-satisfaction. However, according to Hyde et al. (2016) and Chacón et al. (2007), satisfaction instead of commitment is more essential for volunteer retention in the early stages of volunteering. It does not resonate with any contradiction with Handy's (2006) view on 'long-term committed' volunteers.

Besides, Hyde et al.'s (2016) findings on the impact of expectations of others on novice volunteers were in agreement with previous research. These were social pressures on new volunteers (Penner, 2002), the perception of how others people thought about their intentions to commit as volunteer in future (Hyde and Knowles, 2013) and the actual length of service (Finkelstein et al., 2005).

### 3.1.2 *Social satisfaction, social connections and organizational commitment*

In practical terms, Hyde et al. proposed strategies to promote satisfaction, social connections and organizational commitment to promote the development of novice and transition volunteers to the 'sustained' stage.

*"Social norm was an important predictor of intentions to continue volunteering for Novice and Sustained EVs. Thus, expanding social connections beyond team members to include other EVs at events may be a useful approach, and potentially this could be achieved via a 'buddy' system involving Novice and more experienced EVs. Also, development of a commitment to the organization is likely critical for EV retention in the longer term. Personal contact from the organization such as via follow-up phone calls or other strategies that enhance the organization and volunteer connection may encourage commitment for Novice EVs. The strong motive to support the organization financially coupled with anecdotal evidence suggests that organizational transparency and information regarding expenditure of funds raised may strengthen transition and sustained EV commitment"* (Hyde et al, 2016: 60).

For instance, Handy et al. found out that those long-term committed volunteers were more 'other-oriented' than 'self-oriented' (Handy, Brodeur and Cnaan, 2006). Chacón et al. discovered that, in order to retain them, the satisfaction level was more important than their commitment. This was especially the situation for novice volunteers (Chacón, Vecina and Dávila, 2007). Despite a slight discrepancy between different studies, Hyde et al. concluded the importance of promoting satisfaction, social connections and organizational commitment to encouraging the retention of volunteers (Hyde et al., 2016).

### 3.1.3 *Motivation and commitment*

Ford (1992) stated that motivation and commitment are very important for volunteer recruitment and retention. His Motivational System Theory (MST) includes three elements namely personal goals, emotions and Personal Agency Belief (PAB). Personal goals are the desired outcomes. Emotions (personality) refer to the interactions of the individual with the organization including their responses that will produce the desired consequences in the work they do, and lastly PAB is the likely value of desired outcomes for the individual within an organization. MST facilitates effective motivation through the goals, emotions and personal agency beliefs of the individual. It is about the development of competence in the long term (Ford, 1992: 72-76).

Meyer et al. (1989) connect commitment with competence, proposing that a sense of achievement fosters volunteers with more commitment. In fact, McCudden provided Griffin and Bateman's (1996) three elements for commitment: (1) a desire to maintain membership of the organization; (2) an acceptance of the values and goals of the organization; and (3) a willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization (McCudden, 2000: 61).

He further quoted five factors affecting commitment suggested by Guest (1992) (Ibid: 62):

1. Personal characteristics
2. Experiences in the job roles
3. Previous work experience
4. Organizational structure
5. Personnel policy and practice.

Furthermore, there are two dimensions to commitment suggested by Guest (1992). They are

*“(1) continuance commitment, where volunteer stays for long in an organization and provide their service with reliability; and (2) attitudinal commitment, where a volunteer shows extra loyalty and effort as well as a belief in the core value of the organization. Volunteers giving their spare time and energy to the organization provide an indication of such commitment. They*

*would subsequently expect to become competent and acquire a sense of achievement in their role. This supports the view of MST in linking motivation to commitment” (McCudden, 2000: 62).*

#### *3.1.4 Volunteers feeling proud helps to promote commitment*

McCudden (Ibid: 69) studied the factors affecting the retention of volunteers who prevent the occurrences of family crisis or breakdown in some families having at least one child under five years of age and are under stress. Volunteers offer at their home regular support, friendship and practical help to those families. Following are the key findings of the study:

- (i) Volunteers wish to be part of a successful enterprise on a local or international level;
- (ii) The organization should provide initial and continuing training to support volunteer commitment;
- (iii) Volunteers should be supported by staff and other volunteers in both personal and work related matters;
- (iv) Volunteers can perceive the difference between serving in that organization and serving in another agency or the community at large;
- (v) Volunteers need to feel the value and the achievement from their own contributions;
- (vi) Volunteers find their joy and a sense of purpose from the role;
- (vii) From time to time, volunteers’ effort should be appreciated; and
- (viii) Group, official and social activities should also be organized.

After all, personal problems as a result of any changes in personal circumstances and environmental changes, are still the main obstacles to the commitment of volunteers. However, over commitment or other factors such as whether volunteers feel being pressured to achieve organization goal; whether they have quality work to enjoy; any feeling of being rejected by client, staff or fellow volunteers or a drop in service standard should be avoided (McCudden, 2000: 70).

McCudden (2000: 74) derived a SERVER model for organizational management, to be considered in enhancing volunteers' commitment and hence their retention:

**Support structures** – a continuing, professional and flexible structure of training, supervision and support geared to meeting individual needs. Regular positive feedback to them is important to sustain their sense of achievement.

**Expectation** – volunteers should understand the nature and extent of the commitment that they are expected to give to the organization.

**Role management** – volunteers should be encouraged and empowered to meet their own needs and those of clients in a way which will not result in over-commitment.

**Volunteer person specification** – there should be a formal person specification and job description on which recruitment and selection are based. The specification should also be regularly and openly reviewed.

**Evaluation and monitoring** – volunteer commitment should be regularly monitored and evaluated in a way that allows the volunteers to move on.

**Relationships** – relationship between volunteers and the management of the organization should be both personal and professional, and should be founded on openness, understanding and genuineness.

#### *3.1.5 Withdrawal due to personal and life events*

Although an organization might try its best to treat volunteers well, as far as possible, research in general indicated that the basic reason determining volunteers' commitment are personal and life events. Lynn and Davis Smith (1991) found out that only little or even nothing on public policies and volunteer agencies can do to overcome this kind of personal reasons. Instead, changes in personal circumstances are more relevant to their withdrawal from volunteering, such as: having a new job (Wardell, Lishman and Whalley, 1997; Alexander, 2000); going on to higher education (Iveson, 1999; Blake and Jefferson, 1992; Merrell, 2000; Gaston and Alexander, 2001); moving out of the local community (Davis Smith, 1998); and changes in family commitments (Merrell 2000). Both Alexander (2000) and Gaston and Alexander (2001)

also concluded that stability or continuity in personal life, such as being married (see also Hiatt et al., 2000) and already having children (see also Wilson and Musick, 1999) are correlated with continuing volunteering. Those who were married at time of joining were less likely to leave. Other personal factors such as higher levels of education (ibid.) and previous experience of volunteering (Gidron, 1983) are also related to a greater likelihood of remaining in service.

There is no direct link found between demographic factors and how long volunteers can stay in their service. Research findings are quite contradictory. There are some studies that could not find any link between motivation and age and/or gender (Nathanson and Eggleton, 1993; Omoto and Snyder, 1993). However, Rohs (1986) did find a link. Factors that affect volunteers at the beginning are not the same as those that influence them to continue. Although some variables affecting retention are identifiable, there are more complicated influences due to personal characteristics. There is no evidence that allow us to predict whether a certain 'type' of person is more likely to make long-term volunteers than another (Locke et al., 2003).

#### *3.1.6 Withdrawal due to poor volunteer management*

The tendency for volunteers to withdraw from the service increases when volunteering is poorly organized or managed. Factors such as lack of training, poor supervision, the feeling that volunteers are not treasured or appreciated, the perception that volunteers were not deployed in a worthwhile manner or if they are deployed for uninteresting tasks are common causes of volunteers stopping (Alexander, 2000; Gaston and Alexander, 2001). Bebbington and Gatter (1994) suggested that changing relationships between volunteers and the organization, and a loss of communication between volunteers and staff were symptoms of this. Omoto and Snyder (1993) pointed out the feeling of being undervalued. Knapp and Davis Smith (1995) also suggested that a danger of burn-out arose when volunteers leave the agency as a result of pressure from demand. Volunteers would feel over-burdened by the intensity or the quantity of demand upon them (SCPR, 1990).

#### *3.1.7 Flexibility, autonomy and opportunity for development promote retention*



Flexibility and autonomy, which are essential characteristics of volunteering, should not be taken away by formalization, bureaucracy, red tape and the demands on volunteers (Russell and Scott, 1997; Forster, 1998). Forster (1998) found that some organizations allow groups of older volunteers to organize their own project in order to strengthen their commitment. Broadly speaking, continuation is more likely if volunteers are managed in an explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative way (Niyazi, 1996; Hustinx and Lammertyn, 1999; Forster and Meinhard, 2000). Farmer and Fedor (1999) called this symbiotic support. Nevertheless, continuation is also related to context, such as social support and bondings that surround volunteers with a sense of responsibility, and a congruence between organizational and individual intentions (Sokolowski, 1996). Such congruence includes the context and the amount of work (Farmer and Fedor, 1999). This concurs with Blake and Jefferson (1992), who found that a major reason for volunteers from the Samaritans and citizen advice bureaux to withdraw was that they had lost confidence in the organization's work.

Gidron (1983: 32) concluded that, in order to be satisfied, a volunteer needs a task in which self-expression is allowed. This is a task that gives volunteers the chance to develop competent skills which they could consider as challenge and achievement, if the goal is accomplished. Volunteers gain satisfaction when their job is challenging and interesting, allowing them to apply their skills and independence, responsibility and progress. Volunteers also derived satisfaction if they can find a conveniently located job with favourable working hours and without much difficulty to overcome any organizational obstacles. However, support from supervisors, contact with peers and recognition were not considered to be a source of satisfaction.

### *3.1.8 Monetary or social support*

Signed contracts with volunteers on the terms of volunteering (Nathanson and Eggleton, 1993) and full payment of out-of-pocket expenses (Knapp and Davis Smith, 1995) attract volunteers to stay for a longer period of time. The fact that volunteers know that they were needed seriously by local officials or allies or if they thought that nobody could replace them creates a sense of responsibility in them (Locke, Sampson and Shepherd, 2000; Merrell, 2000). Thus, encourages their continuation. More

importantly, research also discovered a more powerful factor, which is the social support derived from the friendships and networks through volunteering (Knapp and Davis Smith, 1995; Dean and Goodlad, 1998).

While friendship is one of the possible gains by a volunteer during the service, there are other elements which might play a role in balancing the give and take. Over-burdened services could be tolerated by them being willing to trust that they would be reciprocated in the long term (Merrell, 2000).

### *3.1.9 Desire for self-esteem and personal growth*

Some studies related continued volunteering to altruism, while others related it to personal gain. Mesch et al. (1998) did not find that the level of altruistic motivation significantly influenced retention. Omoto and Snyder (1993) even concluded that longer-term volunteers were distinguished from shorter-term volunteers by their more 'selfish' desire for personal growth and esteem. In contrast to this was Alexander (2000), who found that those who joined for altruistic reasons had longer service than those who joined for personal development. However, Omoto and Snyder (1993) admitted that there is a relationship between motivation and experience that is essential in retaining volunteers.

Retaining volunteers is not invariably beneficial. Apart from the need for them to move on for employment or education or try other volunteer services (Wilson, 2000), older volunteers tend to resist change. People's motives for volunteering may change over time (Clary, Snyder and Ridge, 1992; Omoto and Snyder, 1993).

Self-esteem is one level in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of human needs, and has been shown to be directly related to expectation of success. People with high self-esteem think that they are confident in processing the ability required to work successfully and are willing to take more risks in job selection (Ellis and Taylor, 1983). They are more satisfied with their jobs than those with low self-esteem (Brockner, 1988). Omoto and Snyder (1995) found that global motivation influences the duration of service, and could be derived from a specific motivation of understanding, personal development and esteem enhancement. Mesch et al. (1998) concluded that there is a negative correlation between self-esteem and retention. Individuals in AmeriCorp with high

self-esteem are more prompt to leave without finishing their service contract than individuals with low self-esteem.

#### *3.1.10 Meaningfulness of work*

According to Hackman and Oldham (1976), volunteers are motivated, find their work satisfying and remain with the organization as long as they find the work meaningful. They feel responsible for the outcomes and know the results. Intrinsic rewards are obtained when they learn that they, personally, have performed well on a task that they care about (Hackman and Lawler, 1971). Gidron (1985) highlighted some significant predictors such as task achievement, the work itself and any intrinsic factors of recognition of such work. Lammers (1991) agreed that the features of the task, such as how challenging and interesting the work is and the amount of responsibility, are important factors. Stevens (1991) found that volunteers who perceived recognition and appreciation for their work are more satisfied and stay longer. However, Mesch et al. (1998) found that stipended volunteers who initially felt that their work is meaningful are no more likely to stay than those who did not find the meaningfulness. Perceived meaningfulness of work does not have a significant influence on retention.

#### *3.1.11 Satisfaction*

Many factors could contribute to the satisfaction of volunteers; the amount of helping and teaching; the relationship with clients and with other volunteers; the quality of work and use of volunteers' abilities and skills; and supervision by professional staff might affect the stay of volunteers (Gidron, 1983). Gidron further divided them into job content and job context. Stevens (1991) found that service activity patterns, such as the cumulative years of involvement in service associations during adult life, are more likely to affect longer stay and satisfaction. However, Omoto and Snyder (1993) found that the satisfaction level between volunteers who quit volunteering and those who persevered with their service are not unlike. March and Simon (1958) stated that retention of volunteers is affected by their satisfaction with and competency at the job and the compatibility of job.

#### *3.1.12 Others-oriented (altruistic) motives or self-oriented (instrumental) motivation*

Motivation to volunteers is usually delineated as altruistic or instrumental motivation. Both are expected to affect retention (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991). Altruistic motives refer to a desire to help others and serve the community, whereas instrumental motives focus more on the self-interest of the volunteer. The former is sometime referred as a moral motive (Sherrott, 1983), an intrinsic motive (Herzberg, 1966) or a public service motivation, which describes the response of volunteers to their internal drives on social justice or affection such as self-sacrifice and compassion (Perry, 1996). Instrumental motivation includes attitude to equip themselves with new knowledge and skill. It might also provide advantage for their careers. Some might wish to socialize, to make more friends and to make good use of their leisure time (Sherrott, 1983). They are sometimes called egoistic motives (Horton-Smith, 1994) or extrinsic hygiene factors (Herzberg, 1966).

Rubin and Thorelli (1984) found that the number of instrumental motives for volunteering is not positively associated with long service. However, Lammers (1991) found that an instrumental motive to learn skills are more useful in paid work and is positively related to retention. Morrow-Howell and Mui (1989) hypothesized that volunteers quit when altruistic motivations are not satisfied, for instance when they found that they were unable to help as much as they thought they could, or that the people who they are trying to help did not respond favourably. However, for a stipended service such as AmeriCorp, individuals with the expectation that their experiences would be beneficial for their career opportunities in future are more likely to quit the service before completing their term. Their high instrumental motivation may account for their reduction in likelihood to stay; if unmet, they leave the service. However, when they acquire instrumental rewards, they also leave. Therefore, such career-related motivations decrease the prospect of retention, in general (Mesch et al., 1998). Although the motivation of most volunteers might be neither strictly altruistic nor egoistic, the egoistic or instrumental part appears to be the stronger determinant of retention. Such extrinsic awards as learning opportunities, rather than financial compensation, might be a short-term attraction for retention (ibid.)

More than 70 per cent of volunteers in Hong Kong have an altruistic motivation, such as wishing to help others. However, nearly half of the volunteers considered that they

could live a more meaningful life by doing so, which is instrumental in nature (Agency for Voluntary Service, 2009).

### **3.2 Selflessness**

I think that the word 'altruism' can only describe one state of 'selflessness', which refers to a person wishing to help others by sacrificing oneself. Being one of the storytellers in this research and the author of this document, I have highlighted my own, what I call 'mystical experience', which concludes that selflessness is the most important endeavour in anyone's life, in my story in Chapter 11 of the book.

There are other aspects of selflessness worth paying attention to. In fact, according to my observations, counselling volunteers or counsellors are regularly practising empathy. To exercise empathy effectively, counsellors need to be congruent with and have unconditional positive regard for clients. This requires them to put aside their assumptions and judgements, and to meet another human being without prejudice (Mearns and Thorne, 1988). In other words, counsellors need to let go of their own interest into a self-free condition or attitude in order to have the capacity to understand fully the inscape of their clients' worlds, not unlike anthropologists.

My advisor refers to those who work in the field of psychological therapies as 'anthropologists of the mind' (Maguire, 2016). It is very important for such practitioners to hold this state of 'selflessness', which others may refer to as suspending the demands of the ego to categorize and judge. This allows them to get in touch with an intrinsic drive for deeper human development. This could be a reason, perhaps not conscious, which fosters them to stay in the role for so long. As such, I include in my literature review work on selflessness for a better understanding of where and how the concept of selflessness is addressed in different disciplines. In fact, MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79) stated that engagement in counselling and various kinds of psychotherapy is one of the nine 'wisdom-fostering' activities. Hence we may be able to see the link between the concept of selflessness and wisdom as well:

*"Only as man withdraws from himself in the sense of releasing self-centered interest and attention will he gain an authentic mode of existence."*

(Frankl, 1967: 56)

'Selflessness' is the foundation of wisdom and a key to the universe (Maslow, 1968). It seemed to have its place in Kensho or Satori, in terms of Zen Buddhism or Nirvana. According to Maslow, Nirvana:

*"is a Buddhist word whose original meaning refers to the extinction or blowing out of a lamp or the flame of a candle. It is the highest form of consciousness, a transcendent state of freedom resulting from the extinction of desire and the blowing out of illusions, in particular, the illusion of an individual self or ego."* (Maslow, 1968: 170)

I confess that, although I was taught since my childhood that we humans should not be selfish, I was not taught to be selfless! To be selfish, I believe, refers to a state of mind when one is always devoted to or cares only for oneself or primarily with one's own interests, benefits or welfare, regardless of others. However, to be selfless seems to be something more noble than, but includes not being selfish. It includes the unimportance and non-existence of oneself.

As Viktor Frankl (1967:56) mentioned above, humans need to release self-centred interest in order to gain an authentic mode of existence. Selflessness is related to our mode of existence, which also relates to the human potentials.

Maslow (1968) also commented that it is ironic that a human being needs to be selfless and step out from its 'humanness' nature of protecting itself in order to find its human potential.

Selfless is not only an action of unselfishness; it is more a state of mind that we can step out of our own interest. According to Maslow:

*"for cognition to be complete, to be detached, disinterested, desireless and unmotivated are necessary. It is at this state of mind humans can perceive the object in its own nature with its own objective and intrinsic characteristic. Otherwise humans could only interpret the objects according to one's own thoughts on its application, usefulness or safety risk".* (Maslow, 1968: 203)

On MacDonald's website, ([www.wisdompage.com](http://www.wisdompage.com) accessed 18 January 2016), he lists three Maslow publications (1954, 1968 and 1970) as a working bibliography for wisdom research. In fact, Maslow's thought was also in line with the principles of 'pre-suppositionless' in phenomenology.

### 3.3 Phenomenology as example on selflessness and as methodology of this research

The notable phenomenologist, Husserl (1970), believed that it is necessary to exclude all empirical interpretation and existential affirmation, and to accept what is inwardly experienced or inwardly intuited as pure experience. Thus, we understand in pure phenomenology that are oriented to real constituents whose descriptions are in every way ideal and free from the pre-supposition of real existence.

This freedom from supposition is called the epoché. It is a Greek word meaning to stay away from or to abstain. In the epoché, we set aside our prejudgements, biases and preconceived idea about things. We ‘disqualify’ or ‘invalidate’ all commitments with reference to previous knowledge and experience (Schmitt, 1968). The world is then present before us, a phenomenon to be scrutinized, to be known naively and freshly through a ‘purified’ consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).

*“Epoché is a preparation for deriving new knowledge and is also an experience itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices and pre-suppositions, and allowing things, events and people to enter anew into consciousness and to look and see them again, as if for the first time. It is a way of looking and being, an unfettered stance” (ibid: 85).*

Moustakas (1994) added that it is the time when we allow a phenomenon or experience to be just what it is, and to come to know it as it presents itself. One’s life of thinking, valuing and experiencing flows on, but what captures us is

*“a holding in abeyance of whatever colours the experience or directs us, anything whatever that has been put into our minds by science or society, or government, or other people, especially one’s parents, teachers and authorities, but also one’s friends and enemies. It likes entering a pure internal place as an open self, ready to embrace life in what it truly offers” (ibid: 85).*

In an epoché, it is the chance to create new idea, understanding, awareness and feeling.

In an epoché, no personal position is taken, and every quality has basically equal value. Only what enters freshly into consciousness and what appears as appearance has any validity in contacting truth and reality.

Husserl (1970: 77) described the person in epoché as *“the doubter and the negator of everything”*. The self-evidence that the person is capable of knowing is available to the person. The person knows that the person sees what the person sees, feels what the person feels. What the person appears in her/his consciousness is something that the person knows is present, regardless of how many others perceive that phenomenon differently.

It is very difficult to achieve an epoché, which is a pure state of being that is required for fresh perceiving and experiencing. However, when returning to the original state of one's conscious experience, hence returning to whatever is there in memory, perception, judgement and feeling, every such thing becomes available for self-referral and self-revelation.

Schmitt (1968) claimed that the world prior to the epoché and the world after it have no differences in content, but only in the way in which the person is related to each of them. The epoché process was described as *“a simply prodigious amount of time, spent in pre-suppositionless observation, is necessary in order to collect and store the factual material which the great computing apparatus needs in order to be able to lift the gestalt from its background”* (Lorenz, 1981:47; Schleidt, 1982).

Another dimension of the epoché is the occurrence of reflective-meditation. It lets the preconceptions and prejudgements enter consciousness and leave freely. This procedure is repeated until a sense of internal closure is sensed. The epoché process inclines the person towards receptiveness. The person is more ready to meet someone or something and to listen and hear whatever is being presented without contaminating others; communication, without his or her own habits of feeling and thinking.

Once the epoché is begun, it is followed by a process of transcendental phenomenological reduction through which data are organized with imaginative



variation, and finally by intuitively-reflectively integrating the composite textual and composite structural description. This develops a synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon or experience (Moustakas, 1994).

In supporting autobiography as a scientific means for obtaining knowledge, Roth stated that studying learning from and through a first-person approach requires two steps: bracketing of experience – also referred to as phenomenological reduction or epoché – and expression and validation (Roth, 2012).

The phenomenological reduction is the task of changing textural languages as just what one sees from the internal act of consciousness the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self, rather than in terms of external objects.

Miller (1984) stated that when we perceive straightforwardly, we focus on the object itself and not the perceiving experience. We lose touch with what is actually before us, with the things itself. Schutz (1967: 50) stated that *“though the attending directed glance of attention and comprehension, the lived experience acquires a mode of being. It comes to be ‘differentiated’ and ‘thrown into relief.’”* Husserl (1931: 114) considered it as *“a graded prereflection, reflection and reduction, with focus at explication the essence of the phenomenon”*. Moustakas explained that *“the explication may mean perceiving, thinking, remembering, imagining and judging, each of which contains a definite content”* (Moustakas, 1994: 91) and every experience where we reflect on it has its own unique open to intuition, a content which can be considered in isolation and on its own (Husserl, 1931: 116).

Then, it comes to the final step on phenomenological reduction. It is about description of the experience in context. It complies the initial epoché and how the person returns to the phenomenon *“in a state of openness and freedom, facilitating clear seeing, making possible identity and encouraging looking repeatedly to enhance the reaching at a deeper layer of meanings”* (Moustakas, 1994: 96) and every perception is of equal value, non-repetitive components of the experience are linked by their common theme and a full description is derived. The prereflective and reflective components of

phenomenological reduction allow the uncovering of nature and meaning of experience. That is the knowledge of the phenomenon. (Ibid)

Though traditional phenomenological research was mostly philosophical in nature (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994), contemporary phenomenologists such as Giorgi (2009) modified it to a more descriptive approach, while other phenomenologists advocated an interpretive approach (van Manen, 2001), moving towards openness in the process (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, 2008). However, the essence of the phenomenology, as a source to obtain new knowledge, rests with the key state of epoché that calls for a mind of pre-suppositionless. Such pre-suppositionless is part of the selflessness state that I refer to, which is to put aside our interest, knowledge, position and experience when encountering a phenomenon.

Phenomenology can be considered as the overarching paradigm covering methods focused on eliciting human experience. Such methods include autoethnography, ethnography, critical autobiography and narrative. While this autoethnographical research is about life experience and subjective meaning for me and the other ten volunteers within the context of the mini-culture of a suicide prevention hotline organization, no doubt it can be epistemologically considered as phenomenology (Young and Collin, 2004). During the process of this research, I received a number of challenges regarding my data collection methods and interpretation of the data. One challenge was that the method was too simple and the interpretation based on too little. However, such challenges contain pre-suppositions, for instance the pre-supposition that contemporary scientific knowledge is akin to absolute truth and lasting; the general view that things which cannot be proven, like some higher human potential, do not exist or are illusions; or that the pursuit and realization of any higher form of wisdom or *eudaimonia* is also in the realm of the magical, and is mythical or even delusory. However, phenomenology provided an interim answer to those challenging questions, as it is a respected research paradigm that calls for abandoning such pre-suppositions and keeping an open mind about what is actually happening in our interactions with the world and how we make sense of its lived and living experience. (See more on methodology in Chapter 4.)

### 3.4 Philosophy

In January 2015, I read the book *Science and the Pursuit of Wisdom: Studies in the Philosophy of Nicholas Maxwell*, edited by Leemon McHenry (2009). This book has linked my thoughts of selflessness with contemporary developments in philosophy. It strengthened the link between the concepts of selflessness and wisdom, as Maslow (1968, 1970) and Pattakos (2010) state that 'selflessness' is a prerequisite and key to wisdom. In the book, Maxwell mentioned that by the end of the academic year 1961 at the University of Manchester he had made himself very miserable. He was struggling hopelessly with some impossible philosophical problems. During the summer vacation, one evening he experienced a series of 'psychic explosions' that tore him apart after his factory job in the day time. Such experience ultimately altered the rest of his life (McHenry, 2009: 10). He confessed that his earlier desire to be a great theoretical physicist and master of the universe, a great novelist and a master of human life was both pushed to the limit of absurdity, manifestations of a desire to become God. This was undesirable. It should be more desirable to be something that seemed too insignificant to deserve any consideration at all: 'MYSELF' (ibid.).

Maxwell realized that 'the self' is the most valuable thing in existence. He considered it something sacred. He tried to distinguish between what is 'me' and what is 'not-me'. He thought that

*"Our identity is not what lies inside us. Our identity exists in the interplay between what lies within and without. What lies within us is just as mysterious as what lies without us. If the distinction between 'me' and 'not-me' is depicted as a circle on a surface, the 'me' is not, as we ordinarily assume, what lies within the circle; it is rather the line of the circle itself. We should not, ludicrously, try to increase the circle until, in the limit, everything is incorporated within it; nor should we, almost equally ludicrously, try to decrease the circle until it becomes a dot and disappears and there is just 'everything': instead, we should 'relax the muscles of identity' so that the line of the circle becomes permeable and there can be an easy interplay between what lies within and without, and we become our authentic selves, without striving to expand until,*

*in the limit, we become everything or shrink until we become nothing”*  
(McHenry, 2009: 10-11).

Since 1972 Maxwell has argued for the need to bring about a revolution in the aims and method of science and for academic inquiry in general. In 1984 Maxwell published his book, *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, in which he proposed the change from knowledge-inquiry to wisdom-inquiry:

*“What I advocate is a radical change – a radical evolution – in the overall, fundamental aims and methods of inquiry. At present we have a kind of academic inquiry that has, as its basic intellectual aim, to improve knowledge. This needs to be transformed. I shall argue, into a kind of rational inquiry that has, as its basic intellectual aim, to improve wisdom. Maxwell defines wisdom-inquiry as ‘rational inquiry devoted to promoting wisdom’.* (Maxwell, 2007: 61)

Maxwell emphasized an important status of the person. This is to be able understand what is ‘me’ and ‘not-me’; and to ‘relax the muscle of our identity’. These concepts are very similar to the concept of selflessness, where a person needs to ignore what a person originally has, and to release the subjectivity that he has. Similar to the epoché, to be pre-suppositionless is a prerequisite for acquiring new knowledge and attaining wisdom.

### **3.5 Wisdom research**

Wisdom has always been a debatable subject for philosophers throughout time. In the book *Roots of World Wisdom*, Mitchell provides a global account on wisdom covering Asia, Africa, Europe and America. *“As in life, wisdom has appeared in many forms such as ancient Zen koans and contemporary science fiction, medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy, African versions of natural theology and Native American origin stories”* (Mitchell, 199: xi).

There are references to wisdom across cultures, and it is mainly because of their work on wisdom that many ancient philosophers are still read and studied today. It was only in the twentieth century that psychologists began to research wisdom on a neural biological and evolutionary basis in search of operational definitions for wisdom (Sternberg, 1990: Ch 14). Such operational definitions of wisdom have varied according to the diversity of scientific and humanistic schools of thought. It is challenging to find

a single, comprehensive definition that covers everything for everybody. Perhaps that is also because it is usually an experience of being in the presence of wisdom, rather than believing it to be something that one can account for and perhaps learn through some codified system of neural pathways or accumulated mode of knowledge. One example is Josipovic et al. (2012) which published the work on meditation techniques including those of Buddhists, to understand how it works and how it can enhance cognition.

Birren and Fisher (1990: 325) summarized three historical definitions of wisdom as follows:

- (i) Greek: an intellectual, moral, practical life; a life lived in conformity with truth, beauty;
- (ii) Christian: a life lived in pursuit of the divine; absolute truth; and
- (iii) Contemporary: a scientific understanding of law governing matter in motion.

Although I do not subscribe to any religion, I found an exploration of some overview texts about how different belief systems view wisdom helpful to my understanding of transcendence which I explore in later chapters. I believe that religions are reflections of and are bound by cultural belief systems that have been passed down for generations or spring up as offshoots or in opposition to existing beliefs. Religions have always had strong social functions, including unity, order, existential meaning, temporal power and expansion. Through these, millions of people over the centuries have died or been killed in the name of religion and thousands continue to die for this reason today. I am interested in what binds us, rather than what divides us. This has been reinforced by my many years of volunteering to help people who have come to the edge of life and would rather extinguish it than go on living. I look at the volunteers and, although I can see some influences of childhood beliefs, it is not religion that informs them in how they are with others. At times, believing in a religion helps people to cope with the stresses of life and for others it inhibits them from living the lives that they would like and in which they would feel more fulfilled. Through this part of the literature I came to relate more to ancient thought and to the initial essence of some belief systems than to any religious system in the world today.

I am struck by the analysis of the concept of wisdom in the Platonic dialogues:

*“wisdom as sophia, (or theoretical wisdom) is a special gift of the philosophers and of those who have devoted themselves to a contemplative life in pursuit of truth; ...” wisdom as phronesis is the practical wisdom of the statesman and lawgiver*. This is the wisdom with which people can find their *“practical course of action”* . They can be aware of and escape the drives of *“passions and the deception of senses” ; ...” wisdom as episteme, a form of scientific knowledge developed in those who know the nature of things and the principles governing their behavior.*” (Robin in Sternberg, 1990: 14)

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) focused on practical wisdom in particular, which is the foundation of action. As he stated, human beings can find happiness through three aspects of its soul, namely the vegetative part, like a plant, in terms of growth; the appetitive part, as an animal, in terms of movement and sense; and the rational part, unique to human beings, in terms of reflection and thinking (Curnow, 2010: 80-81). Rationality and belief in the human soul provide human beings with a choice of action that is different from both plant and animal and this is always of that *“which promotes the flourishing of one’s human and humanizing attributes.”* (Sternberg, 1990:16-17)

*“For Aristotle, a wise man knows more than the material, efficient or formal causes behind events, he knows, too, the Final Cause, the that for the sake of which the other causal modalities are engaged”* (Robinson, 1990: 16-17). With the close connection between the Final Cause and the very particular task or mission offered by the rationality of being human, Aristotle chose the contemplative or reflective character of humans, rather than the practical, cultural or material life, as the only path to *eudaimonia* (ibid: 17). More discussion of *eudaimonia* can be found in section 3.8 below.

There is always a risk in interpreting the intentions of the ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates or Aristotle. Since they wrote in Greek and are studied in English and other European languages, there is a chance of misunderstanding o their meaning due to the translation. Ancient philosophers wrote at a particular time in history with

contextual factors that informed their thinking, as did their later translators. Although philosophy has always attempted to transcend context, this still needs to be considered, especially in terms of our subjectivity in understanding their words. According to Aristotle,

*“Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general”*  
(*Nichomachean Ethics* VI: 1140a–1140b).

From this quote, what a ‘good life in general’, according to Aristotle, is highly subject to interpretation. For example, people believe Socrates to have been wise, although he said that he was not wise as there were many things that he did not know. However, this has been explained by some as wisdom, or as epistemic humility (Whitcomb, 2010). Modern people do not have full insight into his mind and in fact know very little beyond what has been passed down through other philosophers. Socrates was nevertheless understood as a poor man, but seemingly happy, with his two wives and that he was sentenced to death for stirring up discontent.

Nozick (1989: 296) interpreted wisdom as follows:

*“What a wise person needs to know and understand constitutes a varied list: the most important goals and values of life – the ultimate goal, if there is one; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what kinds of dangers threaten the achieving of these goals; how to recognize and avoid or minimize these dangers; what different types of human beings are like in their actions and motives (as this presents dangers or opportunities); what is not possible or feasible to achieve (or avoid); how to tell what is appropriate when; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; how to improve oneself and one's relationships with others or society; knowing what the true and unapparent value of various things is; when to take a long-term view; knowing the variety and obduracy of facts, institutions, and human nature; understanding what one's real motives are; how to cope and deal with the major tragedies and dilemmas of life, and with the major good things too.”*

In searching for a definition of wisdom, I came across more questions than answers and different scholars with different and even contradictory interpretations of the elements of wisdom. In fact, my general observation is that wisdom varies according to personal experience and belief and is often shaped by their own experience, or are beliefs that are basically cultural or time based. This culture or time-based experience or belief is the very reason that they are not universal truths (see below). My suggestion to myself and to others then is an open-minded approach to this variety of views of something that is universally precious and aspired to and, on the whole, we have the capacity to recognise when we see it and recognise when it is absent.

Christianity and the other Abrahamic religions of Islam and Judaism are, in my thinking, not philosophies but cultural belief systems. The ancient philosophers were looking for universal truth rather than cultural or local power. However, there is also in these religious traditions the recognition of wisdom, although that may be defined more in terms of what is acceptable as wisdom within the boundaries of the religion and its beliefs and doctrines, rather than as a universal virtue. Christianity's focus on love in its beginnings could be seen as a search for universals of humanity. But it is embodied in the religion's idea of God and God's relationship with humans through his son, Jesus: 'It originates from a sense of awe before the deep mysteries of the cosmos and a strong obedience to conscience and the willingness to accept God's love of man as the only remedy for what is otherwise an irremediable ignorance' (Robinson 1990: 19-20). So, love saves humans from ignorance.

### **The development of contemporary science**

A brief look at the latter centuries of European thinking on knowledge and wisdom indicates that the Italian Renaissance in the seventeenth century had a major effect on the relationship between scholars and knowledge. Scholars tended to make reference to classical Athenian and Roman attitudes. They invested their attention in inspiration for knowledge rather than searching for revelation of any kind. In the nineteenth century, this developed to a stage where leaders of thought found it impossible to accept the metaphysical claims of traditional philosopher-scientists. "In *Critique of the Pure Reason*, Kant had erected what seemed to be a permanent barrier between the



*phenomenal world accessible to the senses (and therefore experimental science) and the noumenal world of things as in themselves they really are.” (Sternberg, 1990: 22)*

However, according to Robinson, Hegel was concerned at such empirical science. He argued that, through philosophy, art and religion, it is possible to exemplify what is universal in the form of particulars. He reiterated the fact that “*the great sages and geniuses of history must have had their more effective sources of wisdom*” that were non-empirical in nature. Such sources could help people to “*transcend the domain of perception and understand what universal truth is*” (Robinson, 1990: 22-23).

In the Eastern world, Confucius said very little directly on wisdom, but he did state: “*By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.*” (Confucius, in Hinett, 2002: v). It appears that Confucius did not relate wisdom much with scientific knowledge; he related it more with personal reflection and adventure.

However, while Buddhism is always referred to as an important component to understanding wisdom in the Eastern world, Buddhism was considered to be one of the most scientific religions. Buddha has in the Kalama Sutta the following teaching:

*“Do not go by revelation or tradition, do not go by rumour, or the sacred scriptures, do not go by hearsay or mere logic, do not go by bias towards a notion or by another person's seeming ability and do not go by the idea 'He is our teacher'. But when you yourself know that a thing is good, that it is not blamable, that it is praised.” (Parami, 2017))*

So, one could say that although Buddhism is not entirely scientific, it certainly has a strong overtone and is certainly more scientific than any other religion. Albert Einstein had high hope on Buddhism. He said:

*“The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both natural and spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity.*

*Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism” (Weerakkody, 2010: 279)*

It appears to me that views are diversified throughout the world on whether contemporary science development should fall into the definition of wisdom development. However, Buddhism was appreciated for its efforts to encourage humans to understand the most important knowledge of life through the spirit of scientific study.

Birren and Fisher summarize the definition of wisdom in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as *“the capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends; sometimes, less strictly, sound sense, especially in practical affair; opposed to folly”* (OED, 1933: 191-192, in Birren and Fisher, 1990: 325). It appears to me that the OED’s definition has leaned on the practical aspect of ordinary cultural life of human beings. Aspects of the higher potential of human understanding of existence or any special state of human consciousness are not covered.

### **My understanding of wisdom**

*“Socrates: The wisdom-loving person – the philo-sophia – is one who searches for the timeless and unchanging truths, never content with the shifting phenomena of the material world.”* (Robinson, 1990: 15)

I think that the quote from Socrates above summarizes one of my major thoughts on the ‘wisdom’ for which I am searching. From time to time, people express the unfairness or suffering that they have encountered in their life. People compare their own worldly experience with others and find unhappiness in their inferior positions. They feel that they have been abandoned by God or caught up in the unfairness of God. I have come to think that all these worldly experiences are transient in nature. They change from time to time and from place to place. I have often wondered how God could arrange such unfair human experiences, if God represents all beauties and virtues, which should include total fairness. Therefore, I started to think that God would not consider local culture. God would only consider some characteristic of

humans that is applicable in any part of the world. Therefore, God is non-cultural bound. This thought, coincidentally, is in alignment with what Socrates mentioned for the *“wisdom-loving person to be interested in the timeless and unchanging truths, never content with the shifting phenomena of the material world”* (ibid).

What I can see changing from time to time is, basically, the general living culture of humans. For instance, religious cultures differ and change from place to place, and even from time to time. Although there is some consistency in having a belief in a God or Gods, as in a higher being who has power over our lives and needs to be honoured and pleased, the religious practices can be very different. Christians can eat anything. Buddhists are vegetarian, while Muslims and Jews are forbidden to eat pork. In terms of fasting, most religions have their own fasting habits, ranging from one or two days to a whole month in a year. There are many more such differences. Sometimes, the essence of religions becomes lost in practices that are a mixture of social laws and doctrines developed to form large cohesive communities or strong communities in the face of opposition man made or from the challenges of nature. One can find wisdom references in the genesis of most belief systems, wisdom as in how to aspire to be better than we are at any given moment.

I am even more detached from religion when I see what happens when good words and thoughts are distorted into lies that lead people to kill or be killed. So far this century, we have seen banks and economies made to crash by avaricious individuals who say that they subscribe to religion. We have the rise of ISIS; a distortion of the good words of Islam, which itself means peace that has caused the horrific death and torture of thousands, and the exile of tens of thousands from their homelands. The harmony in the world is shaken by people defending a particular interpretation of their God’s will. As part of the social construct, it is not easy to understand what is ‘true’ for religion, as it also leads to unpleasant results for people (Lock and Strong, 2010: 227).

The scientific component and history of religious development see religion as a dimension of cultures that, in general, is what Socrates describes as the shifting phenomena of the material world.

This dimension of culture is not one that I invest in. I am more drawn to the philosophical dimensions as they speak about that which transcends difference; for example, the notion of *sophia*, which is neither time nor culture bound, calls for my selective investigation below. Frankly speaking, I think that, if God exists, it will represent perfect balance. I do not believe that such a concept of God would take preference over local religious practices. What 'God' represents for me is symbolic and metaphoric. It is that which is universal and transcends all the petty differences that block our way to aspiring to be better, far better than we are.

In terms of my selection of literature, this research undertaking took me in a direction where I did not expect to go. It took me into philosophy. I am not fully versed in philosophy, but philosophy, in my opinion, should not be closed off in the precious domain of scholars, but should mean something in everyday life. The literature that I have chosen has to mean something to me, to my organization and to the work that we do. It has an illuminating function. As long as I am transparent about my own position, I believe that I can proceed with integrity along this selection route. Ardelt (2005) drew similar conclusion with many researchers *that "wisdom is the quintessence of successful human development" and that 'wise people are considered to be exceptionally mature, integrated, satisfied with life, able to make decision in difficult and uncertain life matters, and capable of dealing with any crisis and obstacle they encounter"* (Ardelt, 2005: 7). Another general agreement is that wise people care about the well-being of others. (McHenry, 2009: 69)

In McHenry (2009: 69-73), MacDonald gave several examples of wisdom studies, for instance, by Seligman and Wilber.

In fact, McHenry (Ibid: 72) referred Martin Seligman as a leading 'positive psychology' researcher since late 90s. He promotes research on positive elements of human such as happiness or resilience rather than the traditional research on pathological issues such as depression or mental illness. Since 1991, he has published several books on positive psychology such as *Learned Optimism*, *Authentic Happiness*, *Child's Play*, *The Optimistic Child* and *Flourish*. The *Character Strengths and Virtues* is another book he published with Peterson to advocate the 24 character strengths of humans which they

identified together with many researchers (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). He also setup The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania which provides a number electronic surveys on positive psychology perspective at <http://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>. (See more on positive psychology in Section 3.9 below)

McHenry mentioned that Ken Wilber (2000) cited research that shows that meditation is the only proven way to move our psychological development beyond what he calls “the ‘sensitive self’ stage to the ‘integrative’ and ‘holistic’” (McHenry, 2009: 72). In order to develop wisdom, MacDonald says that “people need to develop the characteristics of wisdom, including relevant perspectives, values and intellectual knowledge, and to incorporate them into their lives.” (McHenry, 2009:79). He suggests the following nine wisdom-fostering activities:

1. A clear understanding of what wisdom is
2. Counselling and various kinds of psychotherapy
3. Intellectual knowledge that is relevant to the kind of wisdom that we are trying to develop
4. Full and varied life experience
5. Feedback and counsel from wise people
6. The observation of behaviour – our own and others
7. Practices that help us to internalize values
8. Body-awareness practices
9. Meditation.

In support of mindfulness and meditation as wisdom fostering activity, MacDonald also gave the following quote from Tenzin Gyatso (Dalai Lama) who wrote in the *New York Times* that:

*“mindfulness meditation strengthens the neurological circuits that calm a part of the brain that acts as a trigger for fear and anger.... These people – non-Buddhists – were taught mindfulness, a state of alertness in which the mind does not get caught up in thoughts or sensations, but lets them come and go much like watching a river flow by. After eight weeks, Davidson found that in these people, the parts of their brains that help to form positive emotions become increasingly active”. (MacDonald, in McHenry, 2009: 72-73)*

In the book, *Successful Cognitive and Emotional Aging* (2010), Ardelt and Oh gave a summary account of the theory of wisdom. This combines the Western and Eastern concepts of wisdom. The former emphasizes knowledge and reflection, while the latter emphasizes reflective understanding and affection. It is important to note that reflection is a common practice when talking about the wisdom of the East and the West. Reflection is a key component in obtaining wisdom.

### **3.6 Consciousness of self**

In my own professional development, I have found the works of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff to have resonance with my experiences and my thinking, particularly in relation to wisdom.

Ouspensky (1974) states that man<sup>1</sup> is *“a machine which is brought into motion by external influences and external impacts. All movements, actions, words, ideas, emotions, moods and thoughts of a human being are produced by external influences”* (Speeth, 1989: 32-33). In fact, this concept is generally in alignment with the teaching of mindfulness (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1995). By oneself, the human is just a machine *“with a certain store of memories of previous experiences and a certain amount of reserve energy....only in the right circumstances, and with the right treatment, can a human know that he or she is a machine and, having fully realized this, the human may find the ways to cease to be a machine”* (Ouspensky, 1974:13).

Gurdjieff's view was that human beings must know that they are not one, but many. The human has not one permanent and unchangeable 'I' or ego, but is always different. (Speeth, 1989: 32) *“The illusion of unity or oneness is created in man first, by the sensation of one physical body, by his name, which in normal cases always remains the*

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<sup>1</sup> Ouspensky used the term 'man' as a generalised term for human beings, as was the custom at the time. I have changed this to human/human being.

*same, and third, by the number of mechanical habits which are implanted in him by education or acquired by imitation” (Ouspensky, 1974: 13).*

According to Ouspensky (1974), consciousness and intelligence are not the same. It is *“a particular kind of awareness in humans, independent of the mind’s activity-first of all, an awareness of himself, awareness of who he is, where he is, and further, awareness of what he knows or what he does not know, and so on” (Ibid: 14).* His view was echoed by Christodoulides (2012) that *“consciousness is a fundamental quality of the Universe, not reducible to an explanation, for it is the ground of all being, or spirit, about which nothing more can be said. All that we can infer is that consciousness is the ‘place’ or ‘space’ wherein all the information generated by systems in the brain is unified” (Christodoulides, 2012: 20).*

According to Gurdjieff, the human brain is divided into three centers in term of its realm of consciousness, namely the physical, the emotional and the intellectual. However, these three brains ‘attend’ to the matter of the environment (including the society) or *“the blind forces of the nature”* independently. In a perfect stage, human consciousness

*“can be a unity of body, blended with one another at will by the organism”* It is through *“conscious labor and intentional suffering”* that human could possibly *“through his lifelong duty to mold her or his otherwise separately and independently developing centers into a singular whole. It is the blending of these realms of human consciousness which can produces the highest form of consciousness the human can possess: real or objective consciousness”* (Tamdgidi, 2009: 81)

Gurdjieff states that a human being has the possibility of four states of consciousness: sleep; waking state; self-consciousness; and objective-consciousness (Speeth 1989: 41-46). However, human actually lives only in two states: one part of their life passes in sleep, and the other part in what is called the ‘waking state’, though there is very little difference. In ordinary life, a human knows nothing of ‘objective-consciousness’ and no experiments in this direction are possible. With ‘self-consciousness’, a human ascribes to themselves that they believe that they possess it, although actually they can be

conscious of themselves only in very rare flashes and, even then, they probably do not recognize it, because they do not know what it would imply if they actually possessed it. The glimpses of consciousness come in exceptional moments such as *“in highly emotional states, in moments of danger, in very new and unexpected circumstance and situations, or sometimes in quite ordinary moments when nothing in particular happens”*. But under normal circumstance, human has no control over such occurrences. Unfortunately, modern psychological schools do not touch on any of this topic (ibid).

Thomson (2013) interpreted that Gurdjieff have given four evidences for the claim that human is being asleep: (i) It is very difficult to remember oneself except for a very brief of time; (ii) human identifies oneself with his or her own thoughts and feeling and cannot distinguish between his own state and those identification (with others); (iii) human are dreaming and mixing imagination, illusions and fantasy with awareness of reality; and (iv) there are people who really awakened or tried to awake and savour a higher level of consciousness (Thomson, 2013: 8).

*“According to Gurdjieff, the ordinary human being experiences the world in such a way that he or she is generally content with his situation, attain a certain amount of pleasure and enjoyment, and finds life tolerable without progress toward self-realization”* (Speeth, 1989: 46). Gurdjieff explained that *“it is the conditions of daily life that prevent humans from seeking self-perfection- circumstances which were primarily established by humans themselves”* (Tamdgidi, 2009: 114). That is to say that they thought that they have sufficient information or understanding about their life and they therefore never try to achieve the real self-consciousness (Speeth, 1989).

*“The first step for the one wishing to “wake up” and step in the path of seeking self-mastery, then, is to realize that one is asleep in the first place. The first condition for a prisoner to seek freedom is to realize that he or she is in prison”* (Ibid: 115). Moreover, Gurdjieff believed that the ways to achieve “self-consciousness” cannot be provided by normal book or school and it would be different from person to person. (Speeth, 1989)

### **3.7 Four ways to attain consciousness by Gurdjieff**



Gurdjieff proposed that the states of consciousness may come in the form of flashes or peak experience (Speeth, 1989). Those who have devoted themselves to inner work agree that, although such states are more likely to occur during or after intense inner effort, effortful striving is utterly insufficient to attract them. The general barrier to higher states is identification, which is contrary to self-consciousness, when one is lost to oneself. *“Attention is directed outwards the environment or circumstances and no awareness is left for the inner states. Ordinary life is all the time used up in states of identification. Identifying with other people’s expectations is called ‘considering, internal and external’. Internal considering is based on the feeling of deficiency that a person in the less developed states feels most of the time – in this case, the deficiency is felt when people fail to give us sufficient attention or appreciation. It is keeping internal accounts of what we have given and what is, such as that something is owed to us, feeling bad, stepped upon, or hurt when others do not pay up. It cannot occur without identification”*

*“External considering is the practice of empathy and tact. It is true considerateness. It is dependent on a certain reliability and consistency of attention, and on effort on the part of the one who aspires to practise it. It often turns into internal considering after gratitude or caring that is given on its return, prompting an effort to consider another”* (ibid: 43).

According to Gurdjieff, there are four ways to attain consciousness: 1. Fakir for the physical man; 2. Monk (Zen) for the emotional man; and 3. Yogi for intellectual man (ibid: 54). The fourth way was invented by Gurdjieff after his three ‘seekers of truth’ journeys and it has three lines: the first is awareness of oneself; the second is the hardest thing for man, which is to endure the manifestation of others. It provides special conditions and support in the effort to become aware of one’s way of relating to other people, and opportunities to practise new ways of being with others. It involves relationships and interactions with other people, but still the attention is focused on individual patterns of reaction to others and to social context. The third line is for the benefit of the ideas of the work itself. Initiative is allowed and even encouraged, and personal growth or gain is not the main thrust of effort. It needs the requirement of the organization, the group of people who have come together to work

on themselves, to be considered. Selfless service is the heart of the third line of work, and since any selfless action is beyond the capacity of human beings at the ordinary levels of consciousness, this line of work cannot involve any sustained effort until personality is, at least to some degree, disarmed and the level of consciousness improved (ibid: 56).

*“Self-consciousness occurs spontaneously for a brief moment that often leaves particularly vivid memories behind it. These are the high moments that may occur in situations of great danger, intense emotion or extraordinary stress. Then attention is clear, impartial and relatively complete, and is divided between self and environment so that action unfolds spontaneously, appropriately and sometimes heroically. Self-consciousness can also become a way of being. There are many levels of development. It starts with a division into two, as some attention is given to oneself and some is available to perceive the environment. In its fullest form, the basic contraction of ego is absent, producing a quality of experience”* (ibid: 58): as Ouspensky described it, as *“in the state a man has no self as he is usually aware of it”* (de Ropp, 1974 in Speeth, 1989: 58)

According to Speeth objective-consciousness also comes in “spontaneous flashes” and along with “an ecstatic or blissful quality of joyful acceptance” when one feels the knowing of a special state and the alignment with the universe. This condition could even become an ever-present state (Speeth, 1989: 58).

Thomson (2013:19) found a quote by Heraclitus (540-480 BC) which resonated with Gurdjieff’s thought on the sleeping issue of human:

*“For the waking there is one common world, but when asleep each person, turns away to a private one”* (22B90)

As mentioned in Chapter 11 of the book, I experienced what I called a peak experience when I was under extreme tension. I think that it was the spontaneous flash of objective-consciousness that I experienced that allowed me to feel the relationship between myself and the universe when I was in a state of selflessness. It also allowed

me to have a crystal-clear picture of what human beings are encountering, and how humans suffer from their own egocentric thoughts. The moment of peak experience, although short, created a strong sense of joy (*eudaimonia*, according to the ancient philosophy of wisdom [Engberg-Pedersen, 1983]), which I had never experienced before. It made me begin to search for what selflessness means in other traditions and to try to define it more accurately in context.

One of those contexts is where I have carried out this research: a place where one can find people who give a great deal of time and commitment to those in distress. Why them and not others? Why does everyone not do such work? I believe my research on selflessness will continue after this project, and perhaps one day I will be able to write a contribution to our understanding of it and its role in human behaviour. More importantly, through the same line of thought and understanding by the experience, I fully believe that this direction of thinking should be a universal truth. I have no hesitation in sharing this with colleagues and friends, and one-day writing about it at a level of criticality that would be convincing to scholars.

### **3.8 Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) of the ancient Greek philosophers, including Aristotle**

Aristotelian ethics is *eudaimonistic* (Engberg-Pedersen, 1983; Cooper, 2012), and *eudaimonia* is the peak of Aristotle's ethical system. *Eudaimonia* refers to happiness and Aristotle relates everything else, including moral acts (*phronesis*), to *eudaimonia*. Aristotle proposed two concepts of what he called the moral acts, and this has led to some confusion and debate among scholars.

*Phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which is identified as moral behaviour or (virtue) in one sense, refers to *praxis* which itself is intrinsically good or good in itself. However, there is another term, *poiesis*, which explains that a moral act is or must be good, as it is a means to produce something more than that goodness such as *eudaimonia*, which is a state of ultimate happiness for human beings (Cooper, 2012).

Aristotle proposed two types of life and two types of people. Many people thought that Aristotle was proposing the second type of life (contemplative life) in abstract. It

seems to be two types of human being. Aristotle referred to both the person who lives a life of perfect *eudaimonia*, that is, the wise man (*sophos*), and the person who lives a life that is only secondarily *eudaimonic*, as morally good men (*spoudaios*). However, when basic human demands have been fulfilled, the two types of people are sharply contrasted as being engaged in different activities and in those activities alone. The wise man is identified as one who engages in nothing but *theoria*, achieving theoretical wisdom. The morally good man is identified as a man who does nothing but act morally well and performs practical wisdom (Cooper, 2012: Ch 3).

Engberg-Pedersen summarized that moral behaviour is valuable in itself as an independent part of *eudaimonia*, but may also be considered valuable, though only coincidentally as a means to *theroria*. This is because moral behaviour will often coincide materially with acts that bring a certain amount of natural good to the agent, the result being the promotion of *theoria*. Engberg-Pedersen came to the conclusion that, when weighing the claims, moral behaviour takes precedence over those of *theoria*, owing to the particular type of being that human is (Engberg-Pedersen, 1983: 121).

In fact, there are different views from different scholars: Engberg-Pedersen found it difficult to understand Aristotle, as he does not believe the existence of the wise man (*sophos*) in the world or another type of being that man could be (Ibid). Curnow believed so. He wrote that that if the “*philosopher is not actually a god (for that would require immortality), becoming god-like is nevertheless a realistic and attainable ambition. This was why Socrates stated that wisdom is divine.*” (Curnow, 2010: 95). Curnow was not surprised with possible god-like character of the wise as “*in Egypt, Imhotep and Amenhotep actually became gods.*” (ibid: 95) It appears to me that the question of the inconsistent meaning of moral acts (*praxis* and *poiesis*) might be resolved by a study of James on mysticism (James, 1901), Maslow on self-actualization (Maslow, 1968) and the transcended people (Maslow, 1970), the ‘unconflicted behaviour’ by Pearce (2002), or the self-conscious or objective-conscious, as described by Gurdjieff in Speeth (1989):

*“It is true that human beings strive perpetually towards ultimate humanness, which itself may be anyway a different kind of Becoming and growing. It’s as if we were doomed forever to try to arrive at a state to which we could never*

*attain. Fortunately, we now know this not to be true, or at least it is not the only truth. There is another truth that integrates with it. We are again and again rewarded for good. Becoming by transient states of absolute Being, by peak experiences. Achieving basic-need gratifications gives as many peak experiences, each of which are absolute delights perfect in themselves, and needing no more than themselves to validate life. This is like rejecting the notion that a Heaven lies someplace beyond the end of the path of life. Heaven, so to speak, lies waiting for us through life, ready to step into for a time and to enjoy before we come back to our ordinary life of striving. And once we have been in it, we can remember it forever, and feed ourselves on this memory and be sustained in time of stress.*

*Not only this, but the process of moment-to-moment growth is itself intrinsically rewarding and delightful in an absolute sense. If they are not mountain peak experiences, at least they are foothill experiences: little glimpses of absolute, self-validative delight, little moments of Being. Being and Becoming are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. Approach and arriving are both, in themselves, rewarding:*

*I want to differentiate the Heaven ahead (growth and transcendence) from the 'Heaven' behind (of regression). The 'high Nirvana' is quite different from the 'low Nirvana', even though many clinicians confuse them." (Maslow, 1968: 169-170)*

In fact, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which is a record of William James's famous lectures at the University of Edinburgh between 1901 and 1902, James provided his collection of testimonies of many people who had had mystical experiences (James 1901: 342-386). Some of these people related their experiences as being religious and some did not:

From a non-religious angle, Symonds wrote:

*"suddenly at church, or in company or when I was reading, and always, I think, when my muscles were at rest, I felt the approach of the mood. Irresistibly it took possession of my mind and will, lasted what seemed an eternity, and disappeared in a series of rapid sensations which resembled the awakening from anaesthetic influence. One reason why I disliked this kind of trance was that I could not describe it myself. I cannot even now find words to render it intelligible. It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self..." (James, 1989: 347).*

James believed that Saint Teresa was an expert in describing such conditions....

*"...in the orison (process I suppose) of union, the soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world and in respect of herself. During the short time the union lasts, she is as it were deprived of every feeling, and even if she would, she could not think of any single thing. Thus she needs to employ no artifice in order to arrest the use of her understanding: it remains so stricken with inactivity that she neither knows what she loves, nor in what manner she loves, nor what she wills. In short, she is utterly dead to the things of the world and lives solely in God."* (ibid. 347)

Unlike Maslow, James did not give any information on the condition of the persons before they experienced the trance. Nevertheless, he summarized four major characteristics of such experiences, namely: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity. These four characteristics are sufficient to mark out a group of states of consciousness peculiar enough to deserve a special name as the mystical group for careful study (ibid: 342-343).

According to Maslow, some people who have fulfilled their basic needs such as survival, security, love, self-esteem and so on may start to self-actualize with or without some sort of unexpected strange experience. He called such strange experience the 'peak experience'. Most people who have had a peak experience report a kind of joy that they have never before experienced (*eudaimonia*). They felt god-like and able to integrate themselves in the universe, which resembles the element of a 'divine' power inside them that Saint Teresa mentioned.

Pearce (2002) admitted that he mentioned, but did not give details of, his experience at the age of 22 when a 'blackout' had led him to a bizarre, non-ordinary state (a peak experience, I suppose). He used the term 'unconflicted behavior' to describe what he was (Pearce, 2002). It was the beginning of his inspiration for connecting with the universe. Similar to Maslow's determination to write his book on peak experience, despite the lack of scientific evidence on what he was advocating he insisted on writing his book, regardless of his credibility in the eyes of his readers. James, Maslow and Pearce illustrated that the possibility of the so-called 'wise man' of Aristotle and that

they might be the same kind of person who could attain self-conscious or objective-consciousness, as described by Gurdjieff in Speeth (1989).

Another issue is the meaning of *praxis* and *poiesis* of Aristotle (Engberg-Pedersen, 1983). Maslow studied more than 90 persons who experienced a peak experience. Many of them commented that practising virtues might contribute to the unexpected peak experience and they mentioned to Maslow the importance of selflessness (Maslow, 1978). This, together with the testimonies of a mystic group of people in James (1901: 342-386), when they felt that they dissolved into a sense of nothingness, could possibly explain the idea of *praxis* and *poiesis* of Aristotle. Particularly selflessness is a basic element of most virtues. These are intrinsically good things, by their nature, and are what the ordinary good man would do (*praxis*). However, when sufficient *praxis* is exercised, the accumulation might lead the good man to have a peak experience that transformed him into a wise man. The virtues, in this case, become a means (*poiesis*) to take the good man to another level of human existence, which Maslow called a peak experience (Maslow, 1978) or Aristotle *eudaimonia* (Cooper, 2012: 94).

This might be the reason why Socrates maintained that no man who had once learned the truth (the nature of virtue) would be stupid enough to act contrary to it, for he would be acting against his own interests. Crescenzo (1990) also claimed that the aim of life is to discover the nature of virtue. However, to be able to attain truth, one needs to attain 'knowledge'. However, human minds are always being covered as if by some weeds, blocking them from understanding the truth or having the ability to judge correctly between different forms of behaviour and to see things as they really are. Such weeds are made up of all the prejudices, false ideals and superstitions that have accumulated in our minds. Real knowledge or wisdom cannot be detected unless the weeds are cleared away. This slashing away of the weeds, perhaps, is what I referred above to achieve selflessness (Maslow, 1968) or pre-suppositionless (Husserl, 1970), or to relax the muscle of identity (Maxwell, 2007).

### **3.9 Positive psychology**

Many scholars have researched pathological behaviour in humans, such as depression and various kinds of mental disorders, in order to understand their symbols, patterns and thereafter take remedial action to modify the behaviour. However, positive psychologists take a different approach and focus on research on the positive behaviours and positive effects to understand how such good behaviours or practice could have positive effects. My intention to explore the long service of Samaritans originated in the same positive position, which was to study the positive behaviour of the volunteers. As I mentioned above, MacDonald in McHenry (2009: 72) considered positive psychology as part of the research on wisdom.

Positive psychology was not anything new. Even Maslow, in his paper, *Toward a humanistic Psychology* (Maslow, 1956: 18) proclaimed that 'psychology ought to become more positive and less negative'. Maslow and others created humanistic psychology as a forerunner of positive psychology in its goals and concerns. However, Martin Seligman, in the 1990s, reiterated the essence of positive psychology and became the leading spokesman for the new movement. Instead of mental illness, positive psychology focused on mental health.

The concept of a full life includes a pleasant life, an engaged life and a meaningful life. (Seligman, 2002: 260-263). A pleasant life refers to the time that you spend just for yourself. It could be reading or listening to music or jogging, or engaging in any individual sport or meditation: the time that you spend along for your own interest or joy. It is the moment of 'I' base. The engaged life (or engagement) covers the time that we spend with our family or career. It is the time that we carry out our obligations with our immediate family or peers. It is the moment of 'WE' base, where we spend almost 70 to 80 per cent of our life. Finally, a meaningful life refers to the time that we spend with society, the world or the universe at large. It could be your time for the church, for voluntary service or global environmental protection. Research suggests that people differ according to their lifestyle that they pursue, but the most satisfied people are those who are oriented towards all three (a full life), with the greatest weight carried by engagement and meaning (Peterson, Park and Seligman, 2005: 25-38).



In fact, I observe that there is a relationship between the concept of selflessness and positive psychology, in particular the engaged life, meaningful life and the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in positive psychology.

Both the concepts of engaged life and meaningful life refer to the stage of human life where humans need to think and live in consideration of something more than for their own benefit or interest. In the engaged life of our family or our career, we need to sacrifice ourselves for the benefit or interest of others such as for other family members or colleagues. A human being has the capacity to compromise his/her interest in order to achieve family or company goals. It is an important area to study when looking for manifestations of the practice of selflessness.

Similarly, when a human engages with a meaningful life, there is an expectation of an amount of sacrifice of their time for something even bigger than their families or work organization. Whether they are involved in church activities or a societal campaign such as community service or a global movement such as Greenpeace to protect the environment, the human is spending time and effort for the benefit or interest of more people than themselves. Such meaningful life also demands selflessness to achieve meaning.

Another important positive psychology concept that I wish to highlight is the Flow concept. *“It is the stage at which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sake of doing it. It is the period when we are so concentrating on the task that we do not realize how time has passed”* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 4).

I think that this is an important way of perceiving selflessness. When a surgeon conducts a long surgical operation, they experience a state without caring about their own needs. They would just ignore their own hunger or thirst, and focus their mind on achieving a successful operation for the well-being of the patient. Such a state of mind, not noticing one's own needs, is another way of perceiving selflessness. Therefore, positive psychology in a broad sense is related to the concept of selflessness.

There are scholars who are not totally convinced by positive psychology as a panacea for the ills of the persona and the world. My personal and professional experience would put me in that category. I am not convinced that happiness is achieved through positive psychology or that it will result from positive psychology. If so-called 'happiness' is a superficial moment of joy that is only transitional in time, such a low-level happiness would not be a goal for human beings, any more than moments of distraction. However, I do support that some elements of positive psychology such as the search for meaningful life (*will to meaning*, supported by Frankl (1963) or the concept of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) (a state of selflessness) are important elements in understanding human beings.

### **3.10 Perseverance vs resilience**

Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed twenty-four character strengths and virtues. Persistence or perseverance may be considered "*as the voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action, despite obstacles, discouragement or difficulties*" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 229). I wish to compare the word 'persistence' or 'perseverance' with the word 'resilience'. Zautra, Hall and Murray (2010) define resilience as an outcome of successful adaption to adversity. Characteristics of the person and situation may identify resilient processes, but only if they lead to healthier outcomes following stressful circumstance. In fact, scholars further proposed that there are two types of resilience namely *recovery*, or how well people bounce back and recover fully from challenge (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1987) and *sustainability*, or the capacity to continue forward in the face of adversity (Bonanno, 2004).

Zautra et al. (2010: 6) propose that

*"mind-body homeostasis is sustained not by emotional neutrality but by ongoing, purposeful and affective engagement. From this perspective, resilience is expected to extend beyond the boundaries of a person's capacity to stave off pathological states, or a community's ability to recover from a disaster; thus, it includes sustaining pursuits of the positive. In this sense, individual resilience may be defined by the amount of stress that a person can endure without a fundamental change in capacity to pursue aims that give life meaning. The*

*greater a person's capacity to stay on a satisfying life course, the greater is his or her resilience. Whereas resilience recovery focuses on aspects of healing of wounds, sustainability calls attention to outcomes relevant to preserving valuable engagements in life's task at work, in play and in social relation."*

It appears that, in the sense of sustainability in the pursuit of positive, the word 'resilience' could be applicable to the capacity of long-serving volunteers. The hard times that volunteers might experience during their years of service might not be comparable to a level of extreme stress or trauma that calls for their resilience in term of recovery. I think that volunteers are under no mandatory requirement to continue their service, either from personal or career perspectives. Their continuation is more on a voluntary basis, where they really have the choice. I prefer to use 'perseverance' to describe the volunteers, as the level of stress or suffering might not call for a straightforward application of the word 'resilience'.

### **3.11 Mindfulness**

There have been many times when I have felt stressed by the work at SBHK and have sought support that would help me to manage my full-time day job, a family, frontline volunteering and directorship. I am always interested in what supports people in stressful jobs so that I can keep on developing our support and training. In 2010, on the recommendation of a friend, I went to a seven-day mindfulness retreat in Hong Kong. The retreat was led by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh from Plum Village in France. I participated in the camp with a view to experiencing in depth what mindfulness is and how it can help volunteers and support our interventions. It was a large retreat with over a thousand attendees.

In general, during the week, campers were arranged to practise together the following: mindful breathing; mindful walking; mindful eating; morning chanting at 5 am; sitting meditation; yoga, total relaxation; listening to Dharma talk and Dharma discussion; and so on (Tung Lin Kok Yuen Hong Kong, 2010)

The most basic mindfulness skill training is mindful breathing (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1995). We practised together, slowly breathing in and out in order to focus our minds on the

basic things for life and the present moment. By focusing on breathing, we put aside any wandering thoughts of the past and the future. This is an important idea for volunteers or clients in suicidal stress, to understand that most of the stressful events that they have experienced in the past or their anxiety for the future could be imagined as such wandering thoughts. Practising mindful breathing could be a way helping them to get rid of such thoughts. If such wandering thoughts could be reduced or eliminated, clients would enjoy life better and escape from any negative or even suicidal thoughts. Mindful breathing can be practised anywhere and at any time. It is a very convenient way to bring our mind back to the present moment (ibid.).

It is in the present moment that we can enjoy our life with happiness, without being laden with any sadness from the past or anxiety and worry for the future. While suicidal or depressive people are ruminating over negative thoughts aroused by a stressful past event or anxiety for some anticipated event, they overlook what they actually possess at present. For example, if a man lost his beloved wife in an accident, he might be so focused on the loss to forget about his own family members, such as the parents, siblings or children whom he has always cares for. The concept of the present moment draws his attention back to what he is in possession of, who love and care for him, and whom he should not abandon due to the unfortunate loss.

One of the main themes of the Dharma talk from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh was his teaching about how innocent we are in our daily actions. Our every move and action, every speech, is a resultant action from our parents. However, the parenting of our parents was affected by the parenting method that they received from our grandparents. The grandparents were again influenced by our great-grandparents. What Thich Nhat Hanh meant was that every one of our actions is inherited from our ancestors. Whether they were good acts or bad acts, we were being affected (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1995). This concept resembles Ouspensky's concept of humans being subject to external influence (Ouspensky, 1974 and 1997). With this view in mind, humans should be compassionate about any person who did anything unfriendly to us or hurt us. It is not their fault. They are faults generated a long time ago. It is common to have trouble in communicating between parents and children. As children, hence, we should be reconciled with our parents if we are currently not in a good relationship

with them. We should show our tolerance and acceptance of innocent people, especially our family members.

Lastly, meditation is one of the common mindfulness practices to expand the focus of mindful breathing towards a total release from thinking about the past, the present and the future. This is again complemented by McDonald in McHenry (2009: 79), in that meditation is one of the nine wisdom-fostering activities. Volunteers in counselling who have learned mindfulness meditation could gain more benefit in terms of understanding the wisdom and the seemingly uncontrollable thinking patterns of depressive clients.

### **3.12 Logotherapy: Meaning of suffering**

While the undesirable thinking patterns of depressive or suicidal clients might be understood by learning mindfulness, there is probably some knowledge that may help people who are already in that thinking process to escape from it.

One of the philosophies of Epicurus has the following quote from Diogenes Laertius (X.117-21):

*“Harm from other men comes either as a result of hate or envy or contempt, which the wise man overcomes by reasoning... and even if the wise man is tortured on the rack, he is happy... He will resist fate, and will betray none of his friends... He will take more delight in the contemplation than other men... He will hold firm opinions and will not be at a loss. And he will be of the same character while asleep. And he will sometimes die for a friend.”* (Inwood and Gerson, 1997: 442-443, in Curnow, 2010: 100)

According to Curnow, the wise man knows that pain is physical, whereas suffering is mental. When properly understood, suffering can be eliminated, and only knowledge that leads to the elimination of suffering has any value (Ibid).

Another way to understand how a human can overcome suffering is by knowing about the *logotherapy* of Viktor Frankl. Frankl was a Jewish psychotherapist in the 1930s in Vienna, before he was sent to the Nazi concentration camps. He experienced the darkest period of his life when no one in the camp knew whether they would survive the next moment, let alone the next day. He was witness to atrocities and murder on a massive scale. Frankl survived the camp and concluded that only those people who

found meaning for their suffering could survive. He named his discovery and approach 'logotherapy': *logo*, from the Latin, refers to 'meaning' (Frankl, 1963: 104).

To explain the application of *logotherapy*, Frankl told the story of a gentleman who came to see him because he was very depressed after the death of his wife two years before. He loved his wife so much that he could not bear her loss. Frankl asked him one question: What would have happened if he had died earlier than his wife and would his wife have suffered a similar sadness? The gentleman suddenly understood. She would be suffering the same. By her passing away before him, he had saved his wife from similar suffering. Logotherapy, then, is if you know why, you can bear anything (Frankl, 1963: 117).

Frankl's 'will to meaning' – not 'will to pleasure' (Freud) or our 'will to power' (Alfred Adler) – is what illuminates our lives with true freedom (Pattakos, 2010). Freud's 'will to pleasure' believes that man is concerned with keeping an inner equilibrium with a reduction of tension. It is assumed to be the goal of the gratification of drives and the satisfaction of needs. Frankl found this pleasure principle self-defeating. The more one aims at pleasure, the more one's aim misses. Frankl saw that pleasure is never the goal of human striving, but a side effect of attaining a goal. Attaining a goal constitutes a reason for being happy. One needs not care for it once there is a reason for it (Frankl, 1988).

Adler was a contemporary and mentor of Frankl. However, Frankl viewed that the need or drive to seek pleasure (Freud's) and the non-stop pursuit of power (Adler's) were really just attempts to cover up a void of meaning in the lives of these individuals. The void could not be filled at the end. Their will to meaning had been frustrated, for whatever reason. They only chose alternative paths of pleasure and power, or both, which they believed would fill the void (Pattakos, 2010: 66). I believe that that 'will to meaning' provides a strong internal power for any person enduring suffering, and it is withstanding such suffering or manifestations, as mentioned by Ouspensky, which provides the second line of work for people to attain the high level of wisdom they are seeking.

According to Young-Eisendrath, a psychologist, in her book *The Gifts of Suffering; Finding insight, Compassion, and Renewal* (1996), suffering is the unhappiness, the discontent, the negativity or dissatisfaction that we often feel or come across, sometimes in relation to pain or loss but also in response to ordinary irritations in life, such as a traffic jam or argument with others. It is more disturbing than the original pain itself. It usually involves a fantasy, a fear, a thought an expectation or a commentary interjected between us and our experiences. The fantasy or fear about the pain can hold our attention and keep us feeling off-centre and isolated. If we notice how we do this, we begin to see the misery that we create in addition to whatever pain or loss we endure. Through the acceptance and understanding of actual pain we begin to develop the knowledge and compassion that are the unspoken benefits of adversity. Suffering is useful when awakens us to our responsibility for our own attitudes, thoughts and actions. Within suffering are the gifts of self-awareness and compassion (Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Very like Frankl, Young-Eisendrath reminded us that suffering could be overcome and that we could find benefit or meaning from it.

### **3.13 Summary**

#### *3.13.1 Retention of volunteers*

The literature indicates that a number of personal or organizational factors might affect the retention of volunteers. The EVER model even breaks down the retention factors into three stages of volunteering, namely the novice stage, transition stage and the sustained stage (Hyde et al., 2016). Such factors might include social satisfaction and connection (ibid.), and whether their motivations were self-oriented or other-oriented might have different effects on volunteers at different stages of their service (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Sherrott, 1983; Horton-Smith, 1994). Other factors, such as the commitment of volunteers (Ford, 1992) and the SERVER model, and whether the organization can provide a supporting structure to allow volunteers to understand the organizational expectation on them, allow a proper role management of volunteers, have evaluation and monitoring system for their performance and ensure that volunteers take any pride in the service (McCudden, 200), might affect

their retention. However, volunteers might withdraw from the service if there are negative events such as poor volunteer management of the organization (Alexander, 2000), insufficient flexibility, autonomy or opportunity for volunteer development (Russell and Scott, 1997), and insufficient monetary or social support (Knapp and Davis Smith, 1995). The perceived meaningfulness of the work (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) could be a motivation for staying. This might generally increase the level of satisfaction in volunteers (Gidron, 1983).

### *3.13.2 Selflessness and consciousness of self*

A number of different academic disciplines have in different ways addressed the importance of selflessness. For instance, *logotherapy* (Frankl, 1967), phenomenology (Husserl, 1970), philosophy (Maxwell, 2007; Maslow, 1968, 1970), mysticism (James, 1901) and the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, stress the need to eliminate personal prejudice and superstitions before there is a possibility of attaining of real 'knowledge'.

Ouspensky (1974) and Gurdjieff (Speeth, 1989) suggested that a different kind of person could emerge when self-conscious or objective-consciousness can be attained by humans. This idea echoed Aristotle's teaching for becoming a 'wise man' through the practice of virtue. This is also supported by the study of peak experience by Maslow (1968, 1970) and Pearce (2002).

### *3.13.3 Wisdom*

MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79) referred to psychotherapy as one of the nine wisdom-fostering activities. This makes a good link between the works of selfless volunteers and the topic of wisdom. Certain concepts of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), mindfulness (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1995) and logotherapy (the meaning of suffering) (Frank, 1963) have called for a closer examination of the relationship between their nature and the importance of selflessness, therefore the relationship between wisdom and the importance of selflessness can be traced through all the relevant literature. This merging of MacDonald's (McHenry, 2009: 79) nine wisdom-fostering activities with my experience calls for the importance of selflessness, as below:



1. A clear understanding of what wisdom is (concept of Socrates, Aristotle, Maxwell, Mussel, Maslow, Frankl, Ouspensky and Gurdjieff)
2. Counselling and various kinds of psychotherapy (Young-Eisendrath, Hotline service)
3. Intellectual knowledge that is relevant to the kind of wisdom that we are trying to develop (e.g. logotherapy, ancient Greek philosophies)
4. Full and varied life experience (personal suffering or exercising empathy to understand others' suffering)
5. Feedback and counsel from wise people (openness and pre-suppositionless)
6. The observation of behaviour – our own and others (self-awareness and consciousness)
7. Practices that help us to internalize values (reflection, mindfulness, meditation and yoga)
8. Body-awareness practices (mindfulness, yoga and self-awareness)
9. Meditation (mindfulness practice).

This research project is exploring the attributes of long-serving Samaritan Befrienders volunteers. There are explicit personal and organizational aspects to be studied. However, it also appears from the data collected that there might be a tacit factor to be explored. The volunteers were regularly serving people who were in distressing situations. As such, the volunteers were regularly practising empathy in order to build a good relationship with the clients. The exercise of empathy, in essence, is a practice of selflessness, as one needs to empty one's mind from bias or provide unconditional positive regard for the other person. However, from the literature, selflessness is also a prerequisite for achieving wisdom. There is a link to the nature of the SBHK jobs, which fosters the attainment of wisdom by volunteers. In fact, two of the eleven volunteers reported peak experiences, which are extremely rare phenomena, so this is high in a small population: as Maslow says, it is 'rare, mystical, exciting, deeply moving, and exhilarating' (Maslow, 1968: 97). It appears that the literature on the importance of selflessness and the peak experiences of volunteers in SBHK were mutually supporting each other on the concept of achieving wisdom via selflessness or, in ancient

philosophical terms, producing a wise man who could attain the ultimate happiness for a human being.

## Chapter 4 Framework of Methodology Research Activities

### 4.1 Theoretical basis for autoethnography as method of research

Autoethnography is a research method that uses the researcher's own experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences. Ellis and Bochner define autoethnography as *"autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation"* (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 742). It appreciates and acknowledges a researcher's relationship with others. Reflexivity is applied to identify the relationship and interactions between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political. It shows how people struggle in their lives and their perceived meaning for it. It balances intellectual and methodical rigour, emotion and creativity. More often, it strives for social justice for the underprivileged and makes their lives better (Adams, Jones and Ellis, 2015).

Traditional ethnographers worked as documentarians when they entered a culture. They observed and participated in the lives and activities of the community, made records and wrote field notes. They then left, and wrote and published a representation of the group without sharing much with the group members. However, researchers gradually came to realize that such practices could be construed as unethical and incomplete, because they omitted the ethnographer's history of, presence among and experience with others, and the ethnographer's decisions in recording and representing the lives of others (Ibid.).

Ellis, in Adams et al. (2015), questioned how social science could ignore the particular, nuanced and complex element of social life. Traditionally, personal experience, storytelling, care and emotion and issues about our bodies were considered 'feminine' and unpredictable, therefore obstructing the production of objective and rational research, even though subjectivity, experience, emotions and bodies are integral

elements of research and rationality. It is not possible for social scientists to put those elements aside, nor can they bracket out the way that our lives and experiences are intertwined with our research projects and participants (Ibid). Ellis does not think that a researcher can be 'too personal'. Instead, this should be a key part of the work. Hard sciences such as chemistry and physics do not concern themselves with meaning making and social interactions. Science cannot predict what other people might think, say or do, although it might predict cultural patterns and practices. Adams et al. (2015) call for the need to embrace a research method which can acknowledge the fact that social life is messy, uncertain and emotional, and that this not a reason not to research it, but the very reason to do so in order that we can become more knowledgeable about human behaviour.

Adams et al. (2015) used the term 'crisis of representation' in the 1970s to 1980s to describe this split between researcher, research experience and object of research. Such crises prompted researchers to rethink the format and purpose of sociocultural investigation and description. There were many questions raised on the objectives and practices of mainstream social research, for example the goal of seeking universal truths as against local knowledge, especially with regard to social relationships; the possibility of making certain and stable knowledge claims about humans, experiences, relationships and culture; the non-acceptance of stories and storytelling as way of knowing; the hesitation to accept affect and emotion; the refusal to acknowledge 'local knowledge' and how social identities influence how people research, read and interpret and write and perform; and, lastly, the invasive colonialist ethnographic practices that disregard relational ethics and the impact on the culture (Ibid).

To solve such problems, autoethnographers recognized the limits of science, particularly regarding identities, lives and relationships and creating nuanced, complex and specific accounts of personal or cultural experience. Autoethnography can connect personal experience, insights and knowledge to larger conversations, contexts and conventions such as relationally, culturally or politically associated matters. It answers the call to narrative and storytelling and places as much importance on aesthetics and artistic craft, as on intellect and knowledge. More importantly, it attends to the ethical

implications of their work for themselves, their participants, their readers and audiences (Ibid.)

## **4.2 Philosophical basis**

Autoethnography can be considered as either within the constructivism-interpretivism (Chang, 2008: 140; Freeman, 2004: 77) As for ontology, autoethnographers accept 'personal reality' to be a psychosocial construction, with different emphases on internality, externality and personal agency, along the line between constructivism and social constructionism (cf. Young and Collin, 2004).

For autoethnography, It is the meaning of the story that is important and *"not the conventions of highly academic text"* (Méndez, 2013: 281). *"Autoethnographer is actually less concerned with 'revealing' the self or 'confessing' the self and is more interested in finding a unique voice for the researcher and for the work that can deliver rich insights by transcending the restrictive 'metarules' of scholarly discourse"* (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 746). Méndez stated that *"Autoethnography has no specific rules or criteria to adhere to since it can be approached using diverse types of genre."* (Ibid: 284) To name a few, it can in the form of video, poetry, memoirs or photograph or even scientific publication or diary (Chang, 2008: 36). All these materials can be triangulated with other sources of data such as literature, visual artefacts or interviews with other relevant people (Ibid: 103)

## **4.3 Framework**

This research has collected narrative data from members of a particular set of cultural practices and beliefs: a mini-culture. These members have reflected on their relationship with their culture and practices and I, as the researcher, in turn am presenting their narratives with mine and with the multiple narratives of the literature to explore how, in my role as a senior member of this culture, I can bring about change through a critical engagement with such views. To summarize, I present the first-person narratives of the ten volunteers with whom I have had guided conversations in the first ten chapters and then present my own autoethnography in Chapter 11 of the

book. Heppner et al. (2008) agreed that self-report is common to identify facts, opinions, attitudes and behaviours, as well as the relationships among aspects. Richardson (1995) stated that narratives exist at the everyday, autobiographical, biographical, cultural and collective levels. They reflect the universal human experience of time and link the past, present and future. The use of autoethnography in the research invokes the self, that is me as a volunteer (*auto*), who serves in SBHK, an organization with cultural practices, (*ethno*) and the writing of this commentary and the book (*graphy*) (Ellis, 2004). The narratives of ten volunteers serving in the same mini-culture of SBHK contribute to the 'ethno' part of my autoethnography giving a more in-depth view of the culture under study.

In general, Davis et al. (2007) acknowledged the significance of autobiographical writing as lying in the integration of 'the history of a particular context, story of a singular life, and the act of narration of that story (Davis, et al: 10)'. Here, first-person data collected from ten long-serving volunteers are a constituent part of the unique cultural information of SBHK which I have undertaken as the autoethnographer. All data are put together to find their meaning of value to the culture in which we all work.

Both my personal experience and the data collected from the volunteers were transcribed into a first-person narrative in a book, as part of the presentation of this research project. The autoethnographic data from my view as researcher and those ethnographic data of the other storytelling volunteers, in terms of SBHK, were analysed through a communal exploration of how they could maintain their interest in the service for so many years contextualised in existing international literature on volunteer's retention.

There is no published report by SBHK on the turnover rates of its volunteers. My experience in SBHK told me that SBHK managed to train about a hundred volunteers in three recruitment exercises every two years. However, the growth rate of volunteers remained stagnant, as indicated in Table 2 of the book. SBHK maintained 200 to 220 volunteers in the period between 2004 and 2013. It means that the turnover rate was extremely high and sometimes exceeded the annual intake.

From Table 1 in this document, we might notice that only 36 volunteers with two to three years' experience remained in the service in 2013, compared with an average of a hundred volunteers recruited over two years. This turnover rate was more than 70 per cent. Therefore, only a minority of new trained volunteers remain with the service. Of course, there are a number of traditional reasons for quitting, such as changes in their passion, interest, tolerance of stress, career or studies, family or marriage status and so on, which mean that they lack the time to continue with the service. Those who remain in the service in general need to have stability before they can withstand a further level of stress in the long run.

This research aims to understand how volunteers can withstand such a stressful task for over twenty to thirty years, and how they can possibly handle the pressure of talking regularly with people in distress. There are no direct answers to these questions, as volunteers did not mention anything directly on this topic. However, there are hints in various sections, such as in section 7.1.6, where volunteers shared their insights on taking up suicide prevention as a meaningful and challenging task. This echoes Frankl on logotherapy – if you know the meaning, you can bear the suffering. In section 7.1.7, it can be seen that volunteers tend to have more other-oriented motives to balance their needs for a comfortable life. In section 7.1.8, volunteers even reported extra commitment to clients.

#### **4.4 Research family**

The research family is qualitative. Bell (2005) stated that qualitative research focuses on meanings and experiences. This approach is appropriate for my participants and my aims. In autoethnography, my locus of research can be described as the culture in which I work, that is, the SBHK as a mini-cultural system, the methods can include exploration of artefacts such as mission statements, training, policy documents and so on, to understand better the culture that one is exploring. Members of the culture are involved in deepening their understanding of how members see their roles in the culture, and as a member myself I am checking on members' understanding and my own in the cultural belief systems. Data collection is my autoethnography and the narratives of ten long-serving members of the culture, tell of what brought us into this

culture and what keeps us involved, and our roles in passing on the principles or memes of the culture. The external data from the ten volunteers can “*give contextual information to confirm, complement, or reject my introspectively generated data*” (Change, 2008: 104). Such interview data can stimulate memory, to fill gaps in information of the mini-culture, to get new information about and the culture and other associated topics. It can also validate my personal data and gain others’ perspectives on me and the culture. (Ibid: 106)

#### **4.5 Literature search**

Cooper, Hedges and Valentine (2009) highlighted that the literature review for a research should be part of the framework of the analysis. Cooper et al. (2009) further stated that the researcher might carry out a literature search in four areas, namely: (i) an integrative review to present the state of knowledge relevant to a topic and draw conclusions from the many studies that are reviewed; (ii) a theoretical review that accounts for the existence of the phenomenon; (iii) a methodological review to examine the research methods developed and utilized in the works, and finally, (iv) a thematic review that organizes the core themes in the studies and presents their findings within the core theme (Cooper, 1989: 112).

However, my integrative and theoretical literature search reviewed minimal results at the beginning of the research. This was because of the distinctive nature of the research, which concerns a particular group of volunteers from the Samaritan Befrienders in Hong Kong. Although there are Samaritans in other parts of the world with similar hotline tasks, there is not very much in the way of critical literature about them. There is, however, literature on the long service or retention of volunteers in other parts of the world. This literature is closely related to the theme of this research. As Chang, 2008 states that literature data can contextualize my personal story within the public history. It gives autoethnography “*an identity as social science research, intersecting the subjectivity of the inner world with the objectivity of the outer world*” (Chang, 2008: 110). Elements were extracted to compare the behavioural pattern of the long service of volunteers in SBHK, such as their original motives, their satisfaction



levels during the service and other organizational policy issues which might play a role in their retention.

Being one of these long-serving volunteers, I provided my autoethnography about serving in SBHK and my unique life experience. I attributed it to my training in counselling and my life attitude thus developed, as well as my regular practice of empathy in the Hotline. My experience enlightened for me the importance of 'selflessness' in living. Similar Maslow (1978) and Pearce (2002), I consider 'selflessness' as the key to wisdom. Hence, a literature search was also carried to find relevant information. Plenty of the information that was retrieved resonated with and expanded my views on the relationship between 'selflessness' and wisdom.

Major deskwork was undertaken in the preparation of the Chinese transcripts of the guided conversations by selected helpers, and my translation of them into English. This gave me the opportunity to become totally immersed in the data. Further deskwork involved the enhancement of the notes from rough format made during the guided conversation session to a readable book chapter format.

#### **4.6 Fieldwork**

It was time-consuming to collect data by guided conversations with the ten long-serving volunteers. This process took more than a year to complete. The data collected was put into the first ten chapters of the draft book. More details of the process can be found in section 4.9.2 below.

My field notes were my writing down of the experience or the data collection process in my autoethnography. They included the recall of my experience in SBHK over the years and the mystical experience that I encountered in late 2013 as well as my subsequent reflection. It also covered my views on the long service of volunteers thereafter. All my field notes were transcribed in Chapter 11 of the book. The whole of my mystical experience and my reflection on the experience were recorded in the chapter, as were my thoughts on what the participants were telling me. I wanted to ensure that I understood their understanding. I used my field notes to organize these into how they might relate to my own experiences and to writings I had come across.

#### 4.7 Data analysis

Holloway and Jefferson (2000) provided two possible stances for best making sense of narrative material and the experience of doing research. The first insists on breaking down data into its constituent parts, believing that this is necessary to manage the complexity of the material, as well as to build theoretical insights in some systematic way. The second stems from a need to understand the overall form, or *gestalt* of lives, to appreciate the significance of the detail (Ibid.). I intended to adopt Charmaz's (1983) approach to have data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously when comparing the qualitative data of the eleven volunteers. I also focused on exploring the attributes for the volunteers' loyalty from generally the past, present and future perspectives, which are our overall form or *gestalt* of lives as sources of questions and comparisons.

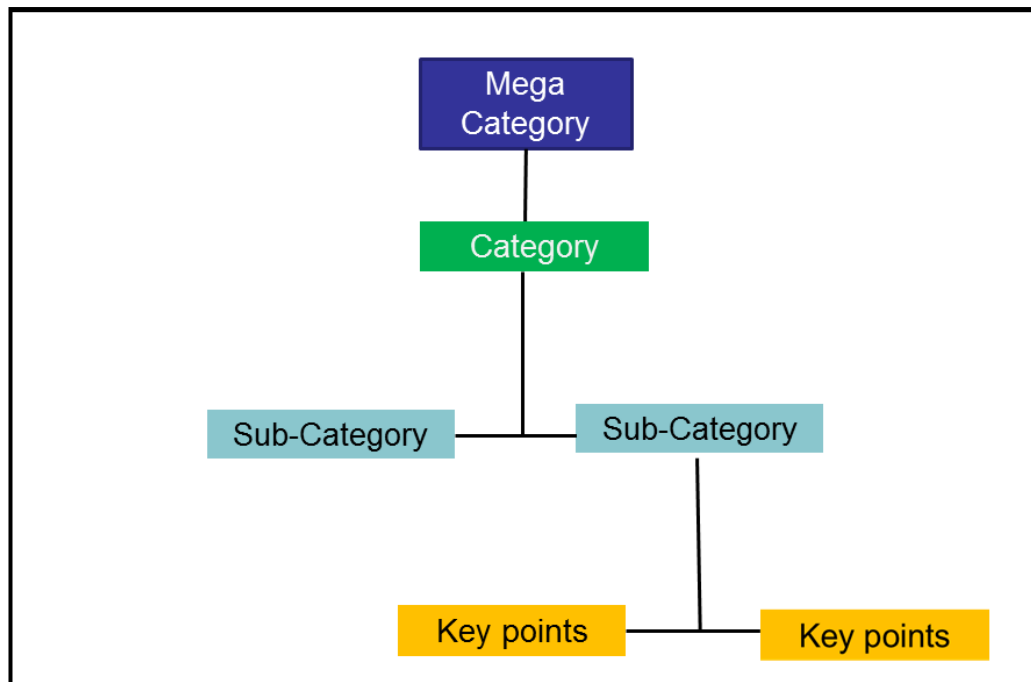
I have endeavoured to quantify the qualitative data in order to allow simple comparison for ease of understanding and a prioritization of focus. Only when the participants focused on any of my pre-contemplated direction, such as childhood experience or unique life episode and so on, would I explore more in that direction. Otherwise, I would focus on recording what they think about their long service and interpret what insights they produced during their service.

Campbell et al. (2004: 127) wrote that an idealized model of research does not always materialize in reality. In fact, for qualitative research, we often see data being collected with a hypothesis in mind and observations geared towards those things that, to a certain extent, are connected with that hypothesis. My hypothesis for researching the attributes of the long-serving volunteers did not adhere to any particular framework when I had guided conversations with the ten volunteers. The participants' own thoughts would take the initial lead. I would only follow up with their thoughts to deepen my understanding of their understanding. However, following the mystical experience that occurred after my data collection from the ten volunteers, and possibly influenced by it, I had a strong motivation to be explicit about my own thoughts on the importance of selflessness and wisdom. I wholeheartedly think that this decision was reinforced by my experience and learning when serving in SBHK. I

could not force other volunteers to accept my hypothesis, nor could I say definitively that they should or could have experience similar to mine. However, what I could do was to provide as many scholarly references for them on this area so that, when the time comes, interested volunteers could pursue an examination of their related experience, if any, and look at the Hotline, or even the whole world, from a different perspective.

In fact, present, past and future would be the mega-categories to start my research. Because of the work-based learning nature and my insider status, such a subjective start of a qualitative research is deemed to be acceptable (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). I hope that my presentation of the participants' narratives will both boundary and integrate my subjectivity on the project with the common goal of illuminating our practices to go into the future better informed. In practical terms, the English transcripts were carefully read.

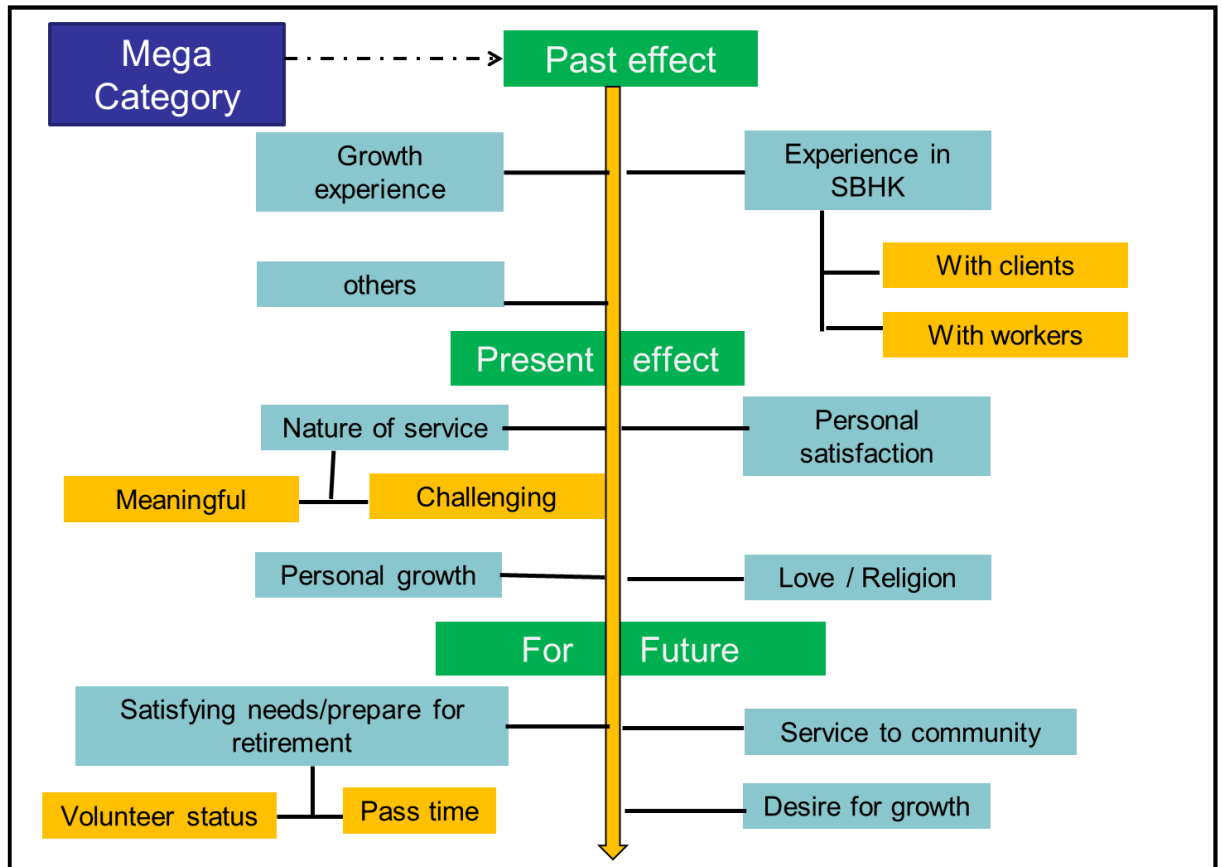
Sub-headings summarizing the key themes of interest were given to relevant paragraph(s) in each of the eleven chapters of the draft book. This helped to further classify them into categories or sub-categories for triangulation. Samples of sub-headings of the narrative data in the draft book can be found in Appendix 2. Although I had my own hypothesis and ideas on the past, present and future of the volunteers, I left these aside and created the conditions for participants to elaborate their own narratives. There were still mega-categories in terms of past, present and future. Further categories could only be examined after being brought up by participants. Figure 2 below shows the simple representation of the mega-category, category and sub-categories.



**Figure 2 Categorization of the layered account**

The number of categories and sub-categories could be increased according to an interpretation of the relationship among different key points. As mentioned before, in being an insider and designer of the research, I had some ideas of what sort of categorization or how many layers of categorization I might encounter. However, while they were preliminary, I needed to be explicit to myself so that I was fully aware of them, limiting their interference.

Figure 3 below shows some examples of categorizations that I thought I might encounter. This was, of course, subject to further elaboration and amendment.



**Figure 3 Possible categorization of the research**

Similar to Glaser, in theory, the key points have to be allocated into categories as far as possible until no more categorization can be done (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). When no further categories appear to be emerging, a theoretical framework is said to be saturated (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). At the planning stage, I could not confirm if I could carry out the full procedure or not. It would depend on the data collected and the need and cost effectiveness of conducting such a procedure.

After the above theoretical sampling stage, I had to compare the categories constantly by examining the boundaries and looking for similarities, differences and explanatory usefulness, and so on. I might need to combine or regroup them or create new categories. However, one very important task for me was to identify any counter-examples or negative cases that seemed to contradict the themes that were emerging (Campbell et al., 2004: 136).

By interrogating the data and categories, I had to ask if I could make any claim out of them. According to Campbell, it might be better if I could use descriptive statements to

make such claims. One of the examples was stating the number of participants who had had the same experience or thoughts. Further to claims on facts, I might also make explanatory claims for reasons why someone was doing what, or evaluative claims about the effect, or effectiveness, of some reported phenomenon of the participants (Ibid.: 137).

With the assistance of the sub-headings in each chapter of the draft book, I could easily summarize the occurrence of similar topics in an Excel spreadsheet. Using a simple formula, I could sum up the number of occurrences of the similar themes such as past emotional experiences, types of parenting received, helping attitudes, religious background, etc. This helped me to select relevant topics for further analysis and comparison with literature. Chang (2008) supports the use of appropriate method (such as Excel) as decided by the researcher to carry out the analysis. He said that no matter what computer technology is adopted, the researcher is still "*the one who has to decide how to manage, analyse, and interpret data*" and the technology cannot raise the quality of the study "*from mediocre to excellent*" Chang, 2008: 118).

Only common topics that were raised by or related to at least by two participants and one literature would be pulled out for analysis and triangulation. This allowed more reliability in terms of triangulation with opinions of various people and studies. Since the number of sub-headings in the eleven chapters was about 200, there were on average 18 sub-headings in each chapter. With the assistance of the sub-headings and my memory of the guided conversations with the participants, the selection of the theme topics was not too difficult to be retrieved from the paragraph(s) under the sub-heading in each participant's chapter. Given the ease of the task and to save cost, it was not worthwhile to purchase any qualitative analysis software to aid the analysis. The Excel spreadsheet used for the selection of topics can be found in Appendix 3.

The final stage of data analysis was to develop theory from the claims, which was the main theme of the task. It was most likely that these were the core categories that integrated most of the other categories and had the greatest potential to explain or describe what was happening among the volunteers. I did not have any idea of what was going to be theorized by the research, although I might have some hypotheses in

mind. The research, perhaps, was helping me to organize and weigh the effects of different hypothesis in my mind in a more scientific way.

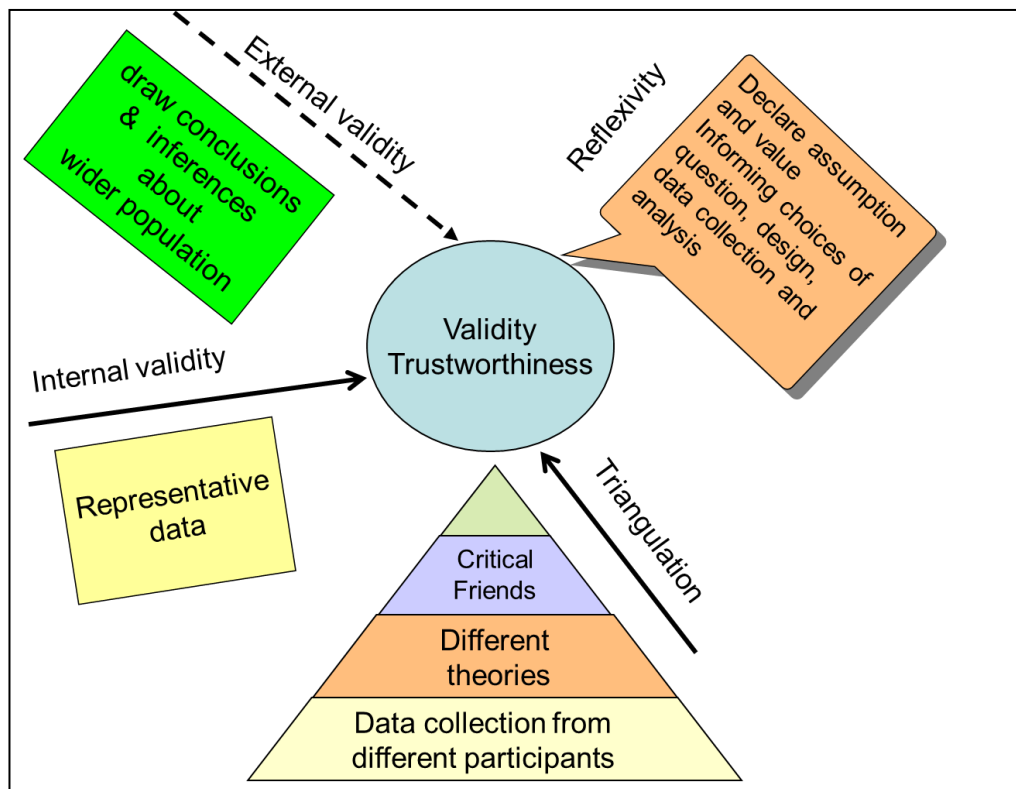
From data collection to data sampling, analysis and theorizing steps, induction was the underlying process. If I could synthesize a theory out of the data, I could predict the loyalty of volunteers by that theory. This was what researchers refer to as the deduction process. I thought that whatever theories I might derive; they would still be subjected to verification by various empirical data.

Data collection can never be subjective, as it also involves the assumptions of the research designer. Observations and data collected by induction process for forming a theory have latent problems, as it is comparable to transforming data from definite to indefinite. Similarly, using theory to predict outcomes based on a formed theory did have latent problems of underpinning the move from universally applicable objective knowledge to the singular application of that knowledge. It was hard to distinguish between something being true and an argument being valid (Ibid.: 5-8). Nevertheless, I adopted Popper's approach that those theories would deem to be valid until falsified by others (Popper, 1971). However, in term of an autoethnographic research, such theories would cover those subjectively hypothesized by me only.

My strategy for enhancing the validity and trustworthiness of the research involved triangulation, transferability and reflexivity. Internal validity or creditability refers to the ability to show that the data of enquiry do represent appropriately the phenomena that those data represent (Guba and Lincoln, 1982: 246). External validity, generalizability or transferability relate to the ability to draw up conclusions and inferences about the wider population, based on what the research found (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004: 71).

Denzin proposed four different types of triangulation, namely methodological, investigator, theory and data (Denzin, 1978: 340). The main theme of my triangulation rested with the collection of data from the storytellers and the search for different theories to explain the behaviour of the volunteers. Besides, I adopted high reflexivity (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004) by overtly expressing our values and assumptions, informing the choices of question, design, data collection and analysis, and conclusions to

improve the trustworthiness of the research. Figure 4 below summarizes the factors that contribute the validity and trustworthiness of the research.



**Figure 4 Contribution to validity and trustworthiness of the research**

#### **4.8 Research methods used**

I considered my research an autoethnographical one by presenting my data in the first person format. The data collection process with the other ten volunteers was by guided conversations and their narrative data was also presented in first-person format. This is commonly used in social sciences (Adams, 2015). I think that this kind of phenomenological data cannot be elicited easily from a questionnaire. What I needed was to understand why volunteers contributed their time and effort to the service and what experience had driven them to do so. Was there any tacit desire inside them to push them to continue the service? There was no quick way to obtain such information. Even the participants might not have thought about such issues through until asked. Therefore, it was necessary to have a highly reflective narrative conversation with them to achieve the purpose.



Since each participant's experience was unique and the influence of the experience on the participant was also different, it would be better to chat with them face-to-face privately for the protection of their privacy and perhaps provide a better personal space for their in-depth reflection. Guided conversation was no doubt a good choice for me to materialize my wish to obtain in-depth data. My role as an insider-researcher actually made my life easier, as I personally knew all of the volunteers. I also knew the culture and history of SBHK very well and could understand what they said to me easily. Besides, I did not need the volunteers to write their own narratives. What would encourage their participation in the research would be just to speak about the stories without the need to spend any extra time and effort in writing anything at length. However, being one of the long-serving volunteers and an insider, I could not escape exercising my insider's judgement to plan and facilitate the research in a certain self-driven direction. Such subjective behaviour is inevitable in work-based learning (Costley et al., 2010).

## **4.9 Research activity**

### *4.9.1 Preparation for data collection*

With the support of the executive committee of the SBHK for the general direction of my doctoral research on the long service of volunteers, and assistance from the administration office of the Samaritan Befrienders Hotline centre, I was given the contact details of 24 volunteers who had been serving for more than twenty years. In fact, I knew most of them personally.

Between late 2011 and 2012, I contacted most of these volunteers by telephone, primarily, according to their years of service, to invite them to join my research. I convinced them that it would be a collaborative effort for all the Samaritan Befrienders to introduce to the world what SBHK is, representing a window into the organization through some of those who work there. I was delighted when the longest serving member (with 37 years of service) accepted my invitation. It was disappointing, however, that several volunteers who had served between 30 to 36 years declined. Some of them told me that they were too busy in their lives, so they could not spare time. However, I assumed that this would be just one of their reasons. One major

hesitation, I imagined, could be my proposal to publish their stories in book form. I understood that not everyone was prepared to publish their life story. It required some sorts of confidence or bravery to do something like telling one's life to the world as a hard evidence of one's life experience. It might affect their image once the book was published, which they needed to consider. As I knew, some long-serving volunteers kept a very low profile. They were humble and did not like to talk much about their service at SBHK. I was totally respectful to that sort of thinking and could not feel too disappointed at their refusal. Fortunately, in the end, ten volunteers accepted my invitation and they represented a spectrum of service from 24 to 37 years, as of 2011.

I did not consider the gender issue as a variable, as the work was focused on years of service. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that two in three of the volunteers in SBHK are female. The reasons for this are various and could form the subject of further research. However, one of the traditional thoughts within SBHK is the fact that men were traditionally rather rational in thinking. Such rationality would not benefit them in passing the qualification test during the recruitment or training stages of the Hotline service. As the primary tools of the Hotline volunteers were empathy and reflection of feeling, males with rational and problem-solving analytical minds were generally not selected to join the service. This ratio was also represented by the male to female ratio of 9: 15 among the 24 potential candidates. The final male to female ratio of the research participants was 4: 6, making it representative of the gender balance of the volunteers.

All participants were given a consent form (Appendix 2) to complete before the conversation to obtain their consent for their data to be published in a book. The form also sought their intention on how they wanted to be named in the book. Such name or pseudonym included their English and Chinese names to cover the chance of publishing a Chinese version of the book. In fact, it has become more and more common in the past twenty or so years for parents in Hong Kong to give their children English, or Christian, names at birth. As a tradition in SBHK, only the surname and the worker number are used for identifying volunteers in client-worker communication.

As most participants gave their consent for putting their real names in the book, the issue of confidentiality became minimal. For participants who authorized me to use their well-known nick-names in SBHK, the confidentiality became a partial one, as most members in SBHK would recognize their identity, while people outside the organization would not. Confidentiality to the outside world was maintained and remains important.

There was not much literature that I could find that related to the study of long-serving Samaritan hotline volunteers. Varah (1973) wrote about Samaritan work from 1953 to 1973. He had only minor coverage of key volunteers talking about their work. No significant information could be used to inform my research. However, there was literature on the retention of volunteers in other disciplines which could offer relevant information and a basis of comparison.

The preparation and design of the guided conversation questions were generally informed by my professional experience and familiarity with the work. The guided questions were as follows, designed to open up space for more depth to be revealed.

- 1} How did you join SBHK?
- 2} What do you think motivated you to join?
- 3} Tell me about your experience throughout the years?
- 4} Are there any cases that you handled which you found especially significant to you?
- 5} What keeps you in the service?
- 6} Do you have any future plan personally or with this service?

Since the participants were not strangers to me, the above research questions were posed naturally, as in a casual conversation.

After my peak experience and my personal recognition of the importance of selflessness and its relationship with empathy and wisdom, I realized that there was one meta-question that underlined all the above research questions. 'Why do you

stay so long to serve people who are suffering, given the fact that you know that it is a very difficult task?’ This underlying question actually provided the common connection between the hypothesis of the researcher on being selflessness and the human drive for fostering wisdom. This is suffering and empathy-related, and the descriptive data of life experiences of all the storytellers.

#### *4.9.2 Collection of data*

The primary data (Chapters 1 to 10 of the book) of the volunteers were collected through my guided conversations with them, starting in late 2011. Conversation was face-to-face in Chinese, as everyone was Chinese, with consent for audio-recording. I scheduled the conversation sessions with them one by one, roughly at monthly intervals. The whole process took more than a year to finish. My original intention was to invite critical friends to witness the sessions to improve the triangulation stratum. However, this idea was dropped as I tended to provide more privacy to the participants during the sessions. However, to ensure that the data collected were rightly expressed, participants were given the preliminary text of their stories for proofreading. In fact, some of them even returned the text with additional comments and paragraphs to elaborate their thoughts and feelings.

Since Hong Kong is a small place, I telephoned the volunteers and set up a convenient schedule to carry out the conversation a few days prior to each session. The venue varied according to their needs. In the end, they were conducted variously in the interview room of a SBHK centre, a room at Middlesex University Asia Learning Centre or at the home of the volunteer. Each session took about 90 minutes. Most were carried out in the afternoon or evening after work. Only two were conducted in the morning.

Prior to the session, the volunteers were greeted and thanked again for participating in the research. We went over the details of their consent, the purpose of the research and the collaboration I had in mind. They acknowledged the need to have the conversation recorded in electronic format. They were given the consent form (Appendix 4) to fill in in front of me, which indicated their preference of the name to

be put in the book. Of course, I mentioned that they could still change it at any time prior to publication.

After completing the consent form, the conversation began in a friendly atmosphere. I had six research questions in mind and posed to them one by one. However, once I posed a question, I let participants elaborate freely. Sometimes, when the narrative moved too much away from the focus of work at SBHK, I recapped what they had said so far and offered another question. Since it was ethnographic research, I shared many of the understandings already, but I checked when I was uncertain about any terms and jargon used by the participants. There was seldom the need for any clarification of points about their experience in SBHK. Only when they talked about their personal experience did I come across unfamiliar terms such as dyslexia or Buddhism. All the sessions were conducted smoothly. There was no pause in between, neither was there a need to pause to change the batteries in the electronic recorder.

As a researcher, I chose to use a notebook computer to jot down the key points of the conversation. The notes were short and rough, and in order, so as not to disrupt the flow of the conversation. My attention was on the face-to-face interaction and immediacy of the contact, rather than my notes. I knew that I needed to compare my notes to the transcript afterwards. In general, I followed the order of the captioned research questions and it ran quite well among the volunteers. I was conscious of not keeping them for longer than the agreed time and had to ensure that I went through all the questions, but also gleaned rich additional data. I became better at this balance as time went on. There was no complaint about overrunning. I believe that participants found the opportunity to tell their stories and to hear their own thoughts out loud to be enjoyable.

The record of my own autoethnographical data was straightforward in one sense, as I was writing my own story based on the same six questions that I had prepared for the other volunteers. What took more time was my immersion in the narratives of fellow workers and what that meant to me and my immersion in the history, ethos, purpose, collective experience and future development of the organization, and how this research could help me to be a useful part of that future.

#### **4.10 Organizing, analyzing and synthesizing the data**

For the primary data, once a conversation session was completed, I organized my notes within one or two days and wrote down the main points with as much detail as possible. Then, I sent the digital file of the conversation to select people who helped me to transcribe the conversation into Chinese. Due to my poor Chinese typing skills, this task had to be done by others. However, I was very pleased that one of my friends, a volunteer in SBHK, helped me to transcribe three copies very efficiently. His assistance really helped me to finish this demanding job. All the transcripts were completed at different times from 2012 to 2013.

I did not consider that I had committed any breach of confidentiality by this outsourcing, as the audio did not provide the identity of the volunteers involved. They were just a record of conversations without any names. The volunteers who helped me were briefed on the nature of the task being transcripts of a research project. All the helpers promised to delete all the files that they were given after finishing the job. With some of the Chinese transcripts being available in 2012, I started to translate them into English. This, again, was a time-consuming and challenging task.

However, I chose to do it by myself as I needed to recall the details of the conversations. This helped me to fine-tune and add any episodes that I had omitted from the notes that I wrote during the session. Each Chinese transcript took at least thirty to forty hours to translate. With the verbatim narratives, my workload and other ongoing activities of my busy life, I could only carry out the task occasionally. It ended up that I completed the task by early 2013. However, some of them were written badly in terms of English grammar. This whole period of translating affected my performance in writing.

While I was working on the English transcripts, I tried to enrich my notes as far as possible. The notes of individual volunteers were eventually modified to become individual chapters in the book. It meant that while I was translating some transcripts, I was also drafting the chapters of the book.

In each chapter, I gave sub-headings to the paragraphs according to the theme of that part of the narrative (see samples in Appendix 2). There were about 200 sub-headings that I made in the eleven chapters of the draft book. With the sub-headings, I mapped out the categories or sub-categories of each sub-heading and produced charts for individual volunteers as per Figures 5 to 15 in Chapter 6. I also recorded that the occurrence of the sub-headings against individual volunteer on an Excel spreadsheet (See Appendix 3). This provided me an overview of the similar or conflicting narratives of certain topics. The more volunteers who supported one similar point would represent a more reliable conclusion in term of triangulation of data. If the literature was also found supporting the same point, the triangulation of data would even be stronger. Chapter 7 provided more detailed analysis of the topics or categories retrieved from the above process.

I must admit that I was frustrated when I was initially organizing and drafting the chapters for individual volunteers. It was due to the fact that, apart from understanding the personal journey of individual volunteers over the years, I did not detect any significant content that could lead to any particular conclusions on the research topic. In retrospect, the period of my frustration was not necessary as, after a more extensive literature review on the retention of volunteers in general, I noticed that their reasons to stay in the service somehow aligned with what the literature had mentioned. I noted that their contributions would be a good reflection of the lives of volunteers, although diverse.

In late December 2013, after I had the 'peak' or mystical experience, I decided to include the unique experience in my story to verify my hypothesis with the experiences of other volunteers. Many different thoughts were still coming to mind, right up to the last minute of submission. However, for the sake of ending the research, I had to put some of my continuous elaboration aside, otherwise this research and the writing of the report would never finish.

#### **4.11 Ethical considerations**

Autoethnography is a research method that uses researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practice and experiences. It acknowledges and

appreciates a researcher's relationship with others. Reflexivity is applied to identify and question the relationship and interactions between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.

From an organizational perspective, there was preparation for permission for the research to be sanctioned by the management of SBHK, which included a substantial explanation of the purpose and rationale of the research. This was important to clarify, as I would be an insider–researcher and wanted to obtain consent not only of the volunteers but of the organization. Preparing this proposal helped me to select ethnography and autoethnography as the most non-invasive approach and to have the agreement of all stakeholders on the value of producing a draft book to support the work of SBHK through a celebration of its volunteers. The board of directors agreed to my proposal to conduct the research with an outcome of a book, appreciating the contribution of the long-service volunteers and making this special organization known to the public for its service in Hong Kong for over half a century. The board agreed in principle to the book. The final publication would be subject to their final view of the draft. Any income resulting from the book sales would be evenly split between SBHK and me to compensate for the expense of transcribing and to support other work in the future.

Procedural ethics considerations to participants included respect to them. I needed to treat them as autonomous persons and acquired their consent to participate in the research which I had done earlier, during the guided conversation, and after the production of the first draft chapter of each individual. I have protected their identity and privacy by allowing them to use pseudonyms in the book and in this document.

I was always mindful that, if there was any 'ethics of consequence' (Etherington, 2007), it was to account for the positive and negative reasons for participating in the study. I tried to acknowledge and work to minimize the power differentials and varying goals between the participants and myself. As I knew that all volunteers participating in my research supported my intention to introduce SBHK to the world, it was a burden but also a push for me to complete the project. I had less negative thoughts about any potential conflict with the participants' interest as they had given me the go ahead to



continue after reading the first draft. Without much modification of the content of the draft, I was confident that their personal interests were protected. I also needed to maintain justice to ensure a fair distribution of research benefits and burdens, such as the promise to contribute half of the income of the book to SBHK.

However, to enhance the situational ethics and to prevent other people mentioned by the participants from any harm when the project unfolded, I had to anonymise their identities to prevent any identification from the text. To date, no issues have arisen in terms of relational ethics between the participants and myself. There was no complaint on my prioritizing of our relationship. There were no inappropriate demands on their time, resources, emotions or patterns of interaction. In fact, I have appreciated their patience in understanding the delays in publishing the book. Otherwise, it would be a pressure on me which, if I could not handle it properly, would damage our relationship. Lastly, I had to remind myself of the issue of confidentiality about their identity, even after the project had unfolded. The anonymization is for the research purposes. However, I will fully discuss with participants if they want to maintain the anonymity for the publication, as it would not be difficult for other volunteers and related stakeholders to identify them. In my initial discussions with them they very much supported the idea of being transparent about who they are, and why they do what they do, in a book.

Apart from the consideration of taking care of the participants and any persons connected to them and mentioned in the book, I also needed similar care for myself. Although I might mask my own identity in the book, I thought that it was not necessary as I really wished to stand up and deliver the message that I wanted to convey. However, I still needed to protect the people that I mentioned in my story. This was especially true for the part about the loss of my identity. As the individual(s) concerned might read the book one day, I really did not want to jeopardize our relationship further by means of the publication. This was the reason for not writing too much detail on this part, but only the essence. There were other areas in which I quoted examples of my observations which involved people who I knew. Again, their true identities were masked to avoid direct recognition.

Apart from personal influence, there might be concerns which affected the ethics of my professional status in SBHK. There was neither any naming of clients nor any negative description of the performance of any identifiable staff in the two documents. However, from the organizational angle, I might have told stories about the shortcomings of the organization which, as a director of the organization, I should not elaborate in public. Nevertheless, as an insider–researcher, I could not hide those shortcomings from exposure, as it would discredit the authenticity and reliability of the research. It was a role conflict which I had tried to balance. However, my ultimate goal would be to provide a factual presentation of the phenomenon within SBHK to foster the trustworthiness of the research.

Although I mentioned about the loss of my friend, which was a traumatic experience for me, I had overcome the sadness and let go of the loss after my transcendental experience. The repetition of the sad story did not trigger any further wounds to me. However, I knew that it was one thing that I needed to keep an eye on myself, namely my emotional fluctuation due to the incident, and perhaps the reaction of my lost friend(s) when the book was read.

Sometimes, autoethnographers are concerned about any implications that their stories might have to harm other persons having similar experiences. For instance, not everyone suffering from trauma will overcome their unfinished business and make sense out of the situation. It might be easy for them to infer a sense of inadequacy or failure, compared with other person's successful story. Such possibility was avoided by not comparing any two experiences directly or criticizing others' performance.

One last thing about self-care is the image I employed for myself in public by autoethnography. My advocacy for selflessness practice, my position for people to pay attention to human potential or to be de-enculturated would become a stereotype for me. Even if I changed my thoughts in future, it might not be easy to leave this field. Those were the pros and cons of getting one's own views published to the community. However, up to this moment, I was still confident in sticking to my current advocacy.

## Chapter 5 Data

### 5.1 Ethnographic data

Chapters 1 to 11 of the book provide the ethnographic data of eleven volunteers, including mine which is autoethnographic. This commentary contains the ethnographic engagement with my environment, with the purpose of our culture, the artefacts we produce and with a specific group of culture members who gave me data about motivations and influences on their position in the culture. Readers of this document should also read the book *Towards Wisdom, Long-serving Samaritan Befrienders Volunteers in Hong Kong* to have first-hand information about them.

There were differences in the style of writing or presentation of the ethnographies. The narratives in Chapter 1 to Chapter 10 were written according to the content of conversation between me and the ten selected volunteers. However, due to the nature of the research, which requires the participants to be introspective about their own experience, the context of conversation made them expressionists who focused on expressing their internal feelings and emotions, and presenting their personal or cultural experience from a subjective perspective (Adams et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there might be a mixture of other elements such as realism or impressionism where things were presented from outside-in rather inside-out, as for expressionism. The ten participants as people and volunteers were not embedded in academic theorizing; therefore, the narratives reflected what they believed about themselves and their work in the context of being members of the culture of SBHK. By contrast, I provided some academic citations in Chapter 11, as this is who I am and how I see myself in relation to SBHK. It is how I understand its practices and belief systems and the adherence of membership. I am trained as a scientist; therefore, making meaning of my world includes reading and theorizing. Coincidentally, this is a conceptualist approach allowing the autoethnographer to use his/her story as a mechanism for conveying and critiquing culture experiences. Such text is highly reflexive (Ibid.).

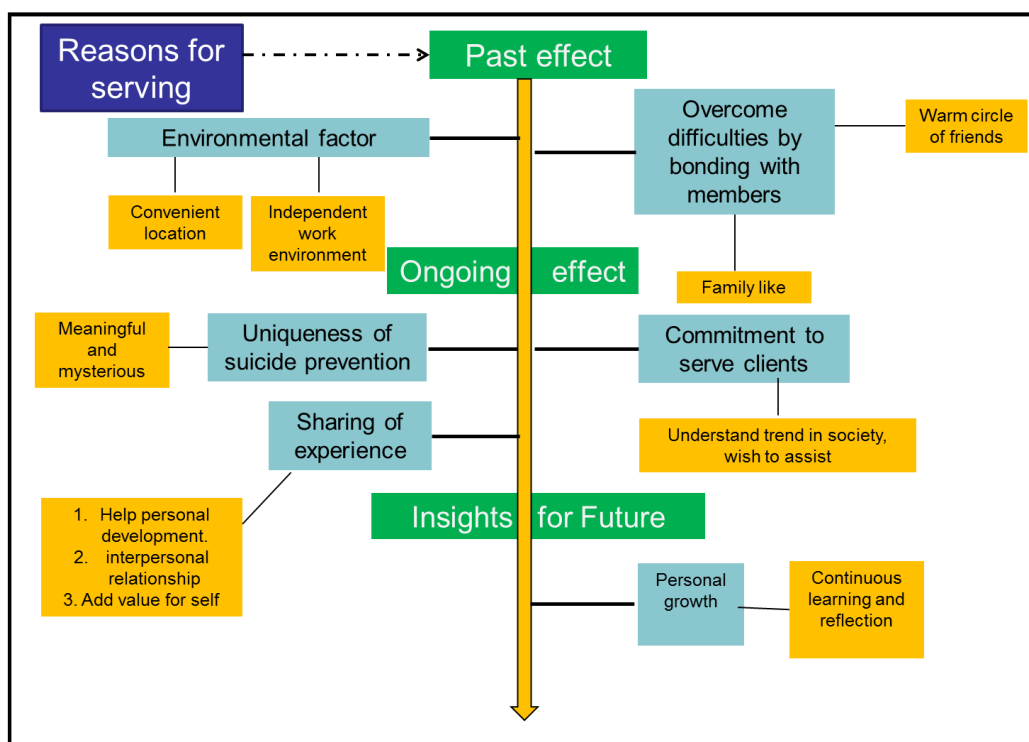
## **Chapter 6 Summary and Categorization of Primary Data**

The following is a brief summary of the individual volunteers' narrative data, as mentioned in each chapter of the book

### **6.1 Chapter 1 – Jason Lee**

There was no particular reason for his joining to SBHK, apart from that the location of the service centre was convenient for him to go to after work. He enjoyed the flexible and independent mode of operation. He had made very good friendships with fellow volunteers in the past. The friendship was warm and family-like. Although most of his peer volunteers had left SBHK, he maintains good contact with them. Their leaving did not affect his passion to serve the clients.

Jason found the suicide prevention hotline meaningful. He also recognized the confidential nature of the service and the perception of mystery associated with it. The service allowed him to understand current trends in society. Sharing and exchange of information with clients and other volunteers helped his personal development and polished his interpersonal skills. He found that there were added chances of continuous learning through his personal reflection. Figure 5 below summarizes Jason's reasons for his long stay in the service.



**Figure 5 Summary of Jason's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK**

## **6.2 Chapter 2 – Han**

Although Han did not recognize any particular reason joining the Hotline service, she was a volunteer during her secondary school years. A friend recommended her to join the service. She described herself as having a helping character. She liked to use that in a role that helped people, and she liked to share her experience with others. Her desire to be in a helping role was further enhanced by now training the newly joined volunteers.

Through her experience in the service, she started to admire human resilience under various difficult situations. She developed her personal belief system gradually through her learning Buddhism. She understood the importance of living in the present moment, and letting go of negative emotions or memories, as she recognized that life was not controllable at the end. Now she could remain calm when under stress. She concluded that the Hotline experience allowed her to have continuous self-reflection. Helping others in the Hotline actually helps her. Figure 6 below summarizes Suk Han's reasons for her long stay in the service.

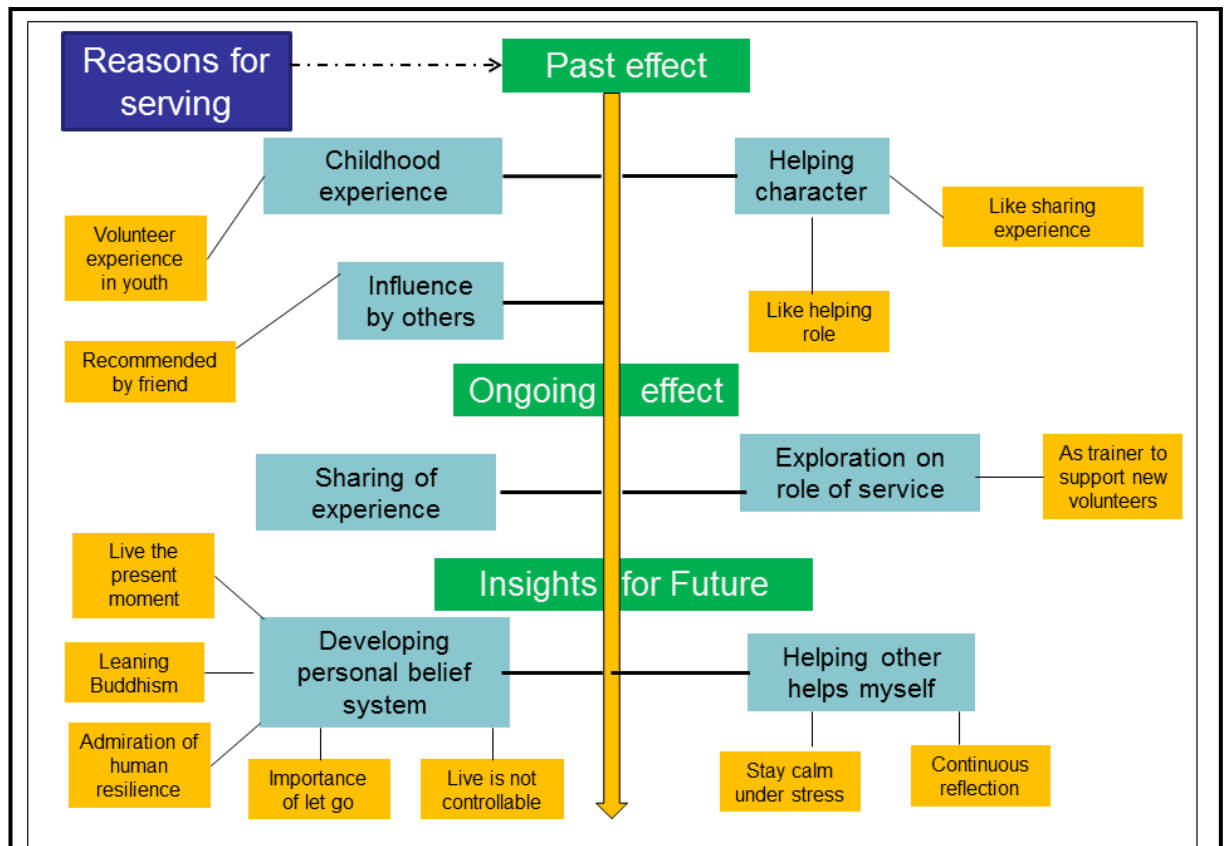


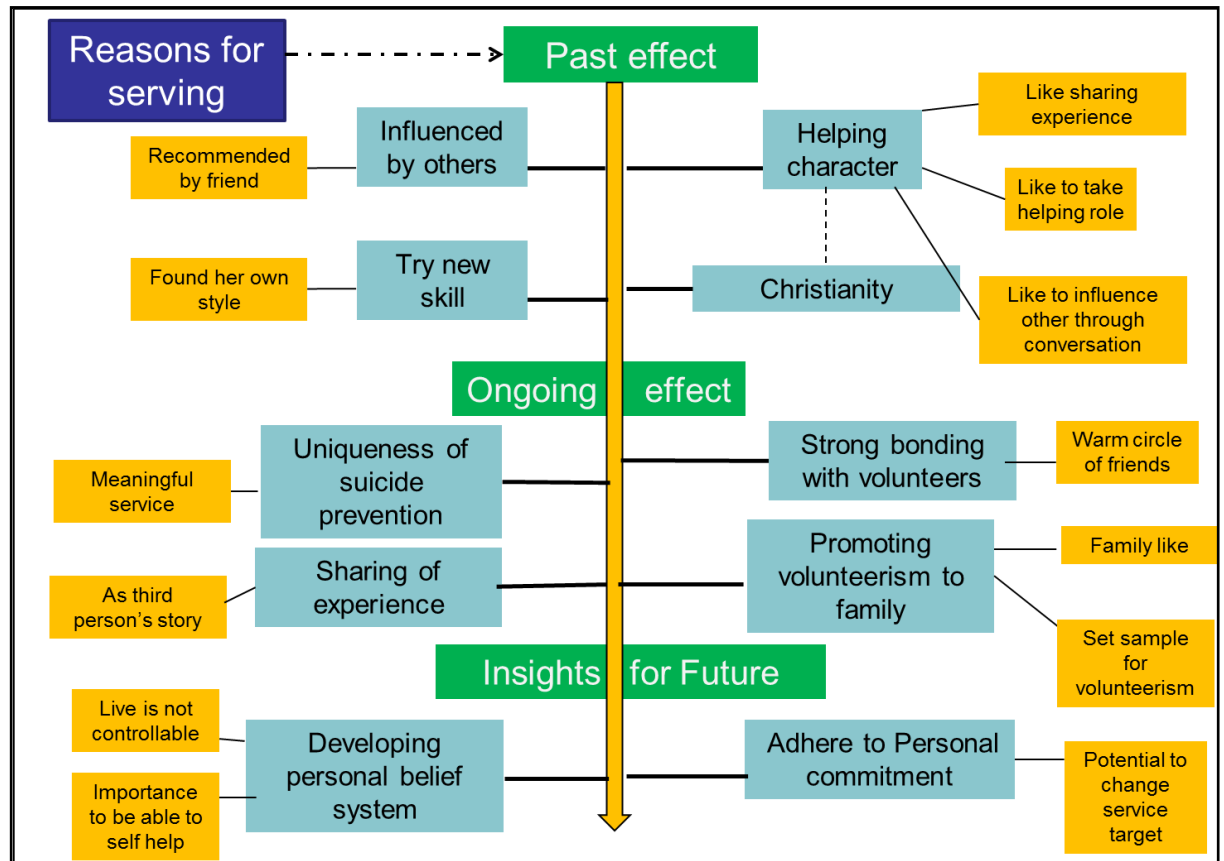
Figure 6 Summary of Han's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK

### 6.3 Chapter 3 – Tooyoung

Tooyoung's Christian beliefs and the encouragement of her friend, who was a volunteer, were why she joined the service. She originally enjoyed sharing her experience with others. However, due to the active listening skills required in SBHK, she understood that direct sharing of personal experience was not a good way of counselling. Gradually, she changed her style. When she found that it would be beneficial to clients for her to learn about someone's experience, she modified her way of sharing, as through the introduction of the experience of a third person. This allowed her to raise some points which she thought would be important to the clients.

Her volunteering became meaningful for her over time. She enjoyed family-like relationship with her fellow teammates. Despite the initial objection of her parents to her joining the volunteer organization, she not only changed their opinion but also tried to convince her family members to carry out voluntary service themselves.

For her, commitment to what a person had promised to do is of primary importance. She carried on her volunteer works following her original commitment to serve. She had no regrets, although she once thought of leaving the service for another one. For her, life was not controllable and it was always important to be able to self-help. Figure 7 below summarizes Tooyoung's reasons for her long stay in the service.



**Figure 7 Summary of Tooyoung's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK**

#### 6.4 Chapter 4 – Polly Wong

Polly had been a Christian since school. She knew that she needs to demonstrate unconditioned love. She was a youth leader in the church. She had a helping character and was introduced by one of her friends to SBHK. She liked to share experiences and influence other through conversation. Over the years, she had tried to take up different roles and to attempt different approaches to handle clients. She had passion for the service and would voice her concerns. She also enjoyed the role of a trainer for new volunteers.

She enjoyed the strong bonding with other volunteers. Her husband was also one of the Hotline volunteers. She liked to share and reflect on her experience with other members and her husband. Serving in SBHK provided frequent opportunity for her self-reflection. It was part of her process of continuous learning and to add value to herself. She had, in the past, devoted much time to handling her dyslexic son. With her personal experience, she also found her call to serve the dyslexics and their parents. Hotline active listening skill did help her to handle hospice cases at work, but not dyslexics.

Figure 8 below summarizes Polly's reasons for her long stay in the service.

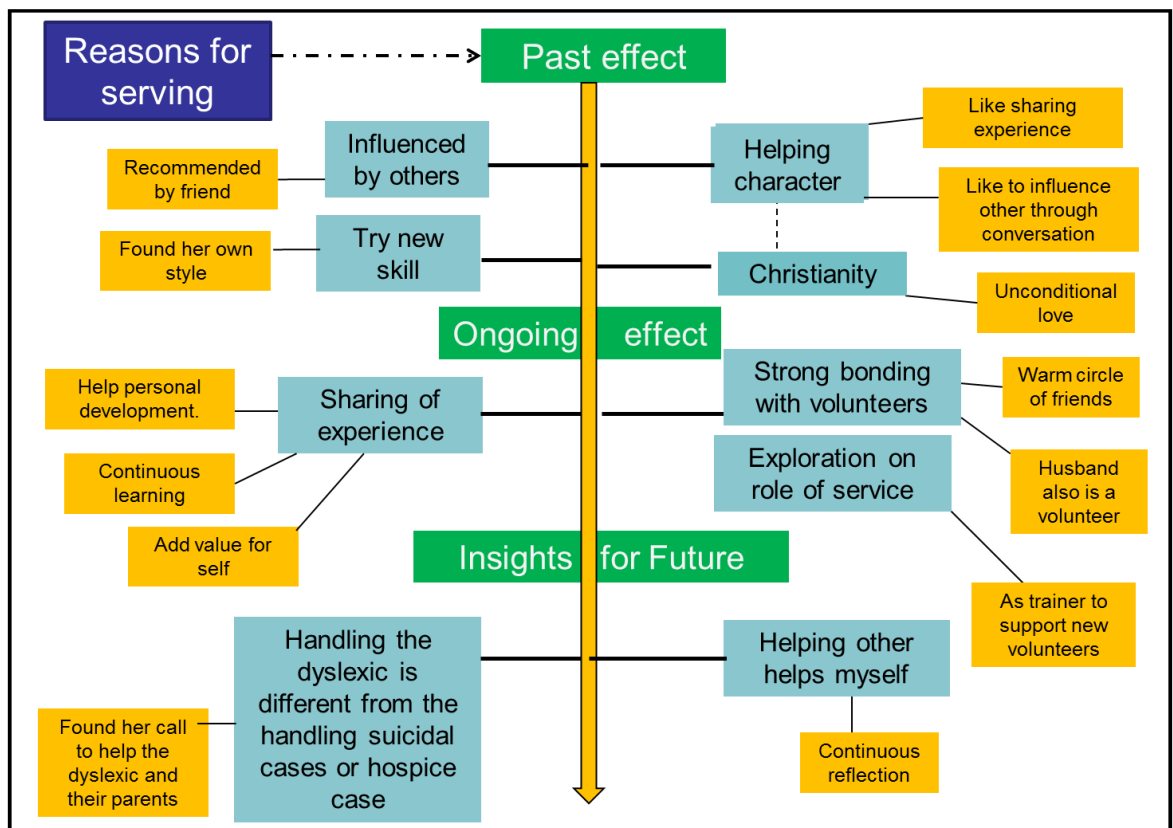


Figure 8 Summary of Polly's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK

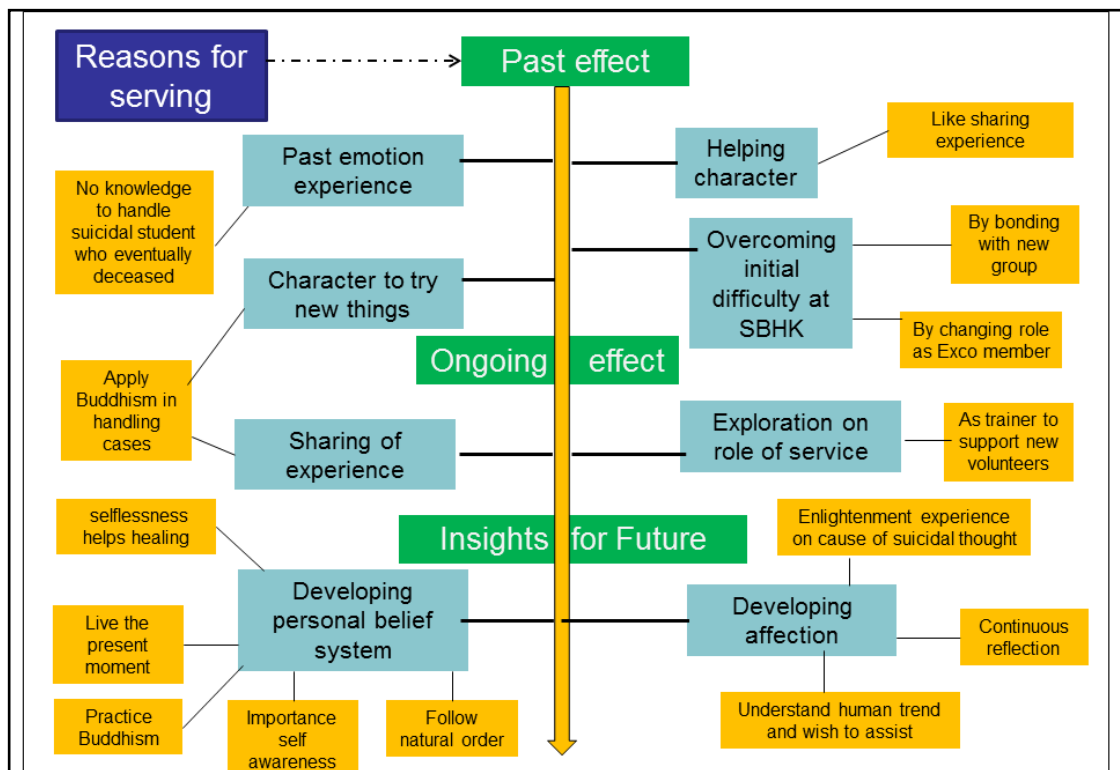
## 6.5 Chapter 5 – Joyce

Joyce recognized, in retrospect, that she had joined SBHK for suicide prevention work probably due to unfinished business. When she was a teacher, she did not take any action to help a suicidal student. The student committed suicide after she left school. Her character of trying new things obscured her true motivation to join SBHK. Her



journey in SBHK was not easy. She once felt lonely and incompetent. She overcame the difficulties by changing her role to that a group leader and finally executive committee member and trainer. She found her way, within the organization, in a different perspective.

With more and more self-awareness, she understood her role and limitation. Without much association with her two strange healing experiences in the countryside, she was determined to practise Buddhism and to follow the natural order, and to live the present moment. With more Buddhism knowledge, she acknowledged that her experience of being in mindfulness and selflessness state had healed her wounds. With the sad and lonely experience of her parents having passed away, her empathic understanding with the suicidal clients was also increased. Her affection for herself and clients was growing. She attempted to apply Buddhism knowledge when handling her clients. She maintained a stable belief for spreading the seed of affection during her conversations with clients. Figure 9 below summarizes Joyce's reasons for her long stay in the service.

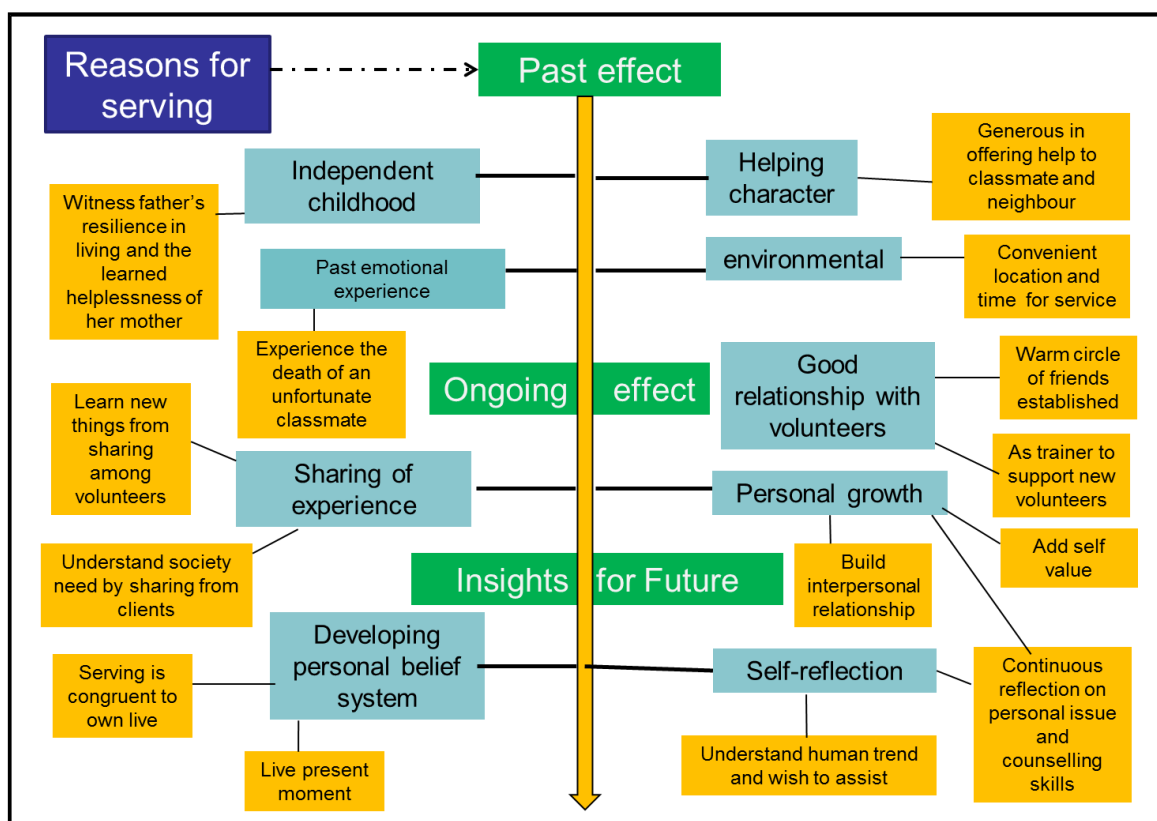


**Figure 9 Summary of Joyce's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK**

## **6.6 Chapter 6 – Bonnie**

Bonnie lived a very independent childhood. As a child, she stayed only with her father for some years and witnessed how resilient he was. She also saw how her grandmother treated her mother and all granddaughters poorly. However, she was not badly affected by the learned-helplessness of her mother. She grew and developed in a stable and healthy childhood.

She was very generous in offering assistance to schoolmates and neighbours. She knew that one of her classmates committed suicide after leaving school. She enjoyed the working environment of SBHK and the friendly atmosphere among the volunteers. She learned new things from volunteers and clients. The clients, in particular, allowed her to understand the needs of the people in society. Her desire to help others was congruent to her character. She liked to help SBHK in training new volunteers. It also provided the opportunity for her to reflect on her counselling skills and her personal growth. She understood the needs of others and was always ready to offer assistance. She lived in her present moment of happiness. Figure 10 below summarizes Bonnie's reasons for her long stay in the service.



**Figure 10 Summary of Bonnie's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK**

## 6.7 Chapter 7 – Mr Lau

Mr Lau had been a volunteer before he joined SBHK. He was a very independent person and was able to solve problems by himself from childhood. He found the service in SBHK meaningful and he valued his membership, as it was not easy to join SBHK. He maintained a very good relationship with other volunteers. In particular, he liked to share his working experience casually among workers. His contribution was well recognized by other volunteers.

In SBHK, his interpersonal skills were enhanced by his regular practice in the service. In fact, the service added value to him. He could use the learned skills within or outside SBHK. He had continuous reflection over the years and he appreciated SBHK for allowing him to try new approaches once he learned and found them potentially useful in supporting clients. Serving clients was congruent to his life, and he would continue the service unless there were great changes to his stable living environment.

Mr Lau thought that there was a need in society to maintain the suicide prevention service. People would learn how to help themselves from the services of SBHK. It was beneficial to society at large. SBHK had set an example and contributed to a better society. Figure 11 below summarizes Mr Lau's reasons for his long stay in the service.

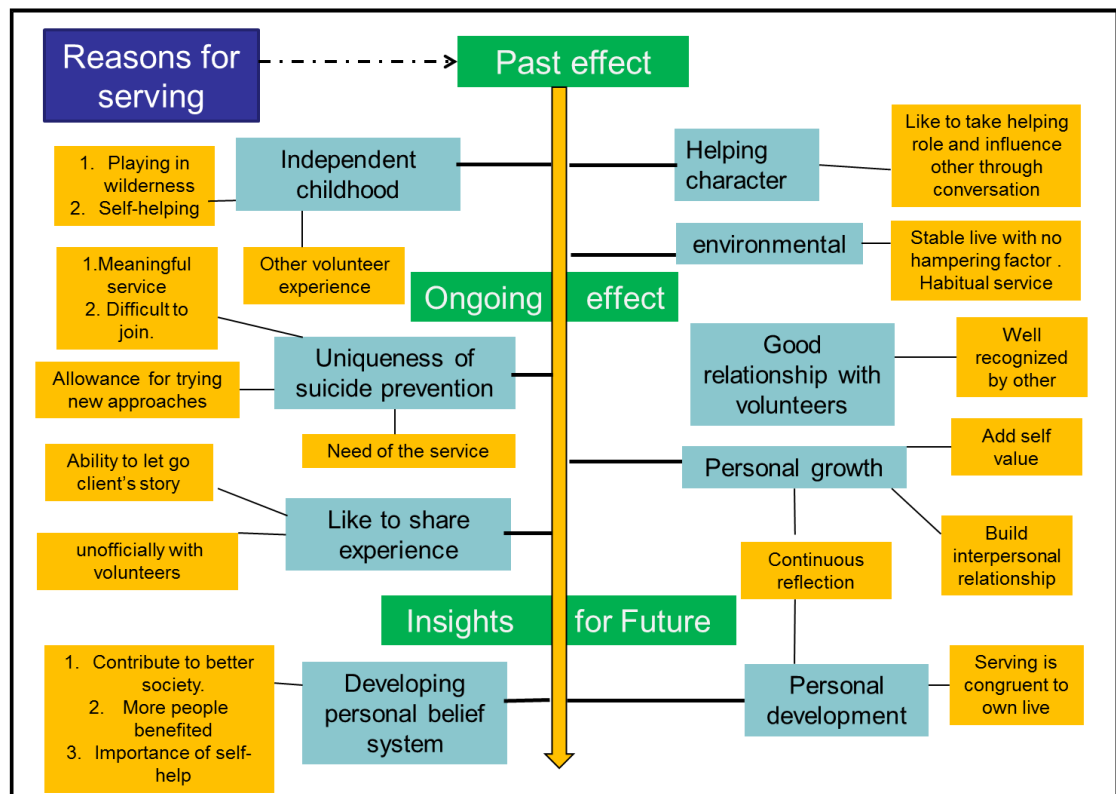


Figure 11 Summary of Mr Lau's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK

## 6.8 Chapter 8 – Robert

Similar to Mr Lau, Robert had a very independent childhood. Both his parents had passed away before his joining university and there was a wide age gap between him and his siblings. He was used to handling most of his problems by himself. He experienced geographical inconvenience in serving SBHK at the beginning. He left the service for some years, but re-joined after problem was solved. He confessed that communicating with clients was not his best skill. He discovered that his entrepreneur character could help SBHK to develop. Therefore, he remained on the executive committee to help in managing the development of the organization. He thought that more life education programmes were needed in Hong Kong.

Robert considered suicide prevention works to be meaningful. He recognized that the human resources and size of SBHK allowed flexibility in its development, which suited the needs of society.

SBHK was his longest serving organization of his life. While he experienced many adversities in his career, serving in SBHK allowed him to stay focused and not to be distracted by the emotional ups and downs caused by his business.

Though he was a Christian, he had continuous reflection and explored Buddhism. He had concerns over the management succession of the organization and he thought that more new types of people should be encouraged to join the executive committee. Figure 12 below summarizes Robert's reasons for his long stay in the service.

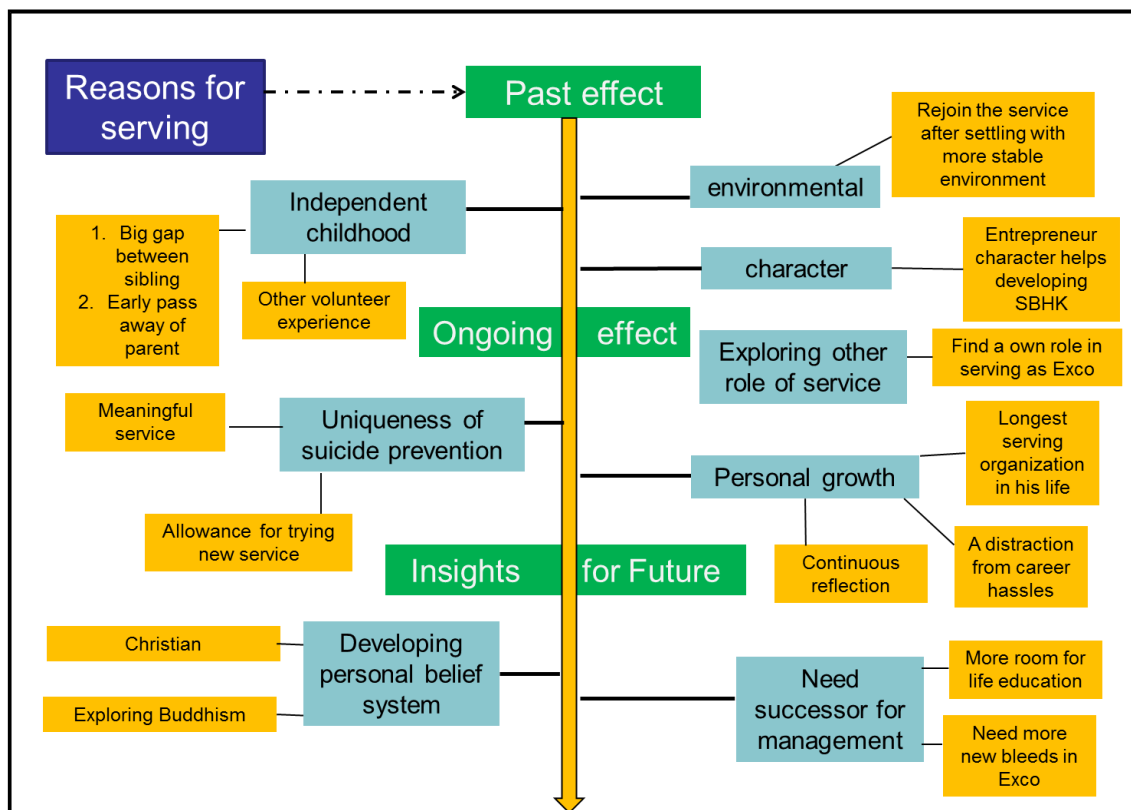


Figure 12 Summary of Robert's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK

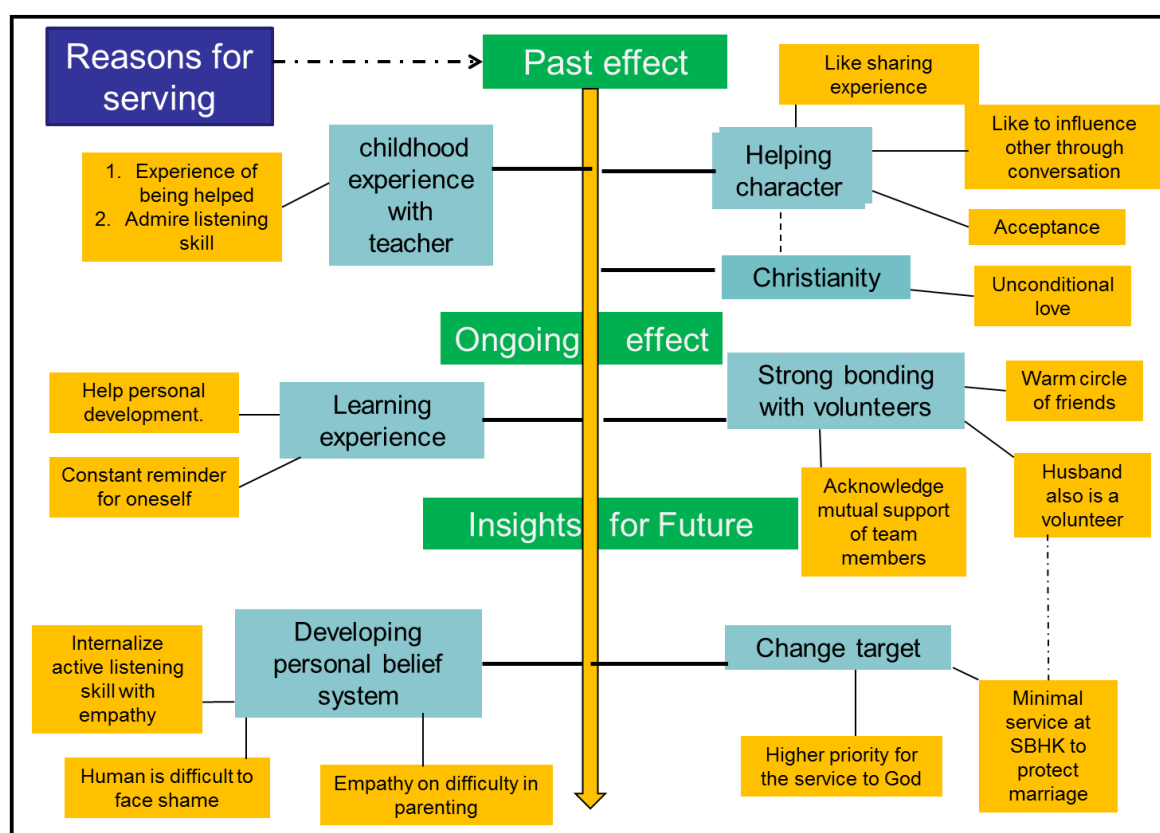
## 6.9 Chapter 9 – Ms Cheung

Ms Cheung learned about active listening skills in a childhood experience when her teacher applied the skills to solve her practical and emotional problem. With her Christian belief and helping character, she demonstrated her acceptance and

unconditional love to others. She liked to help others by sharing experiences to influence others through verbal communication.

She had a very strong bond with her fellow volunteers, in particular her team. Her mother-like character in taking care of her teammates was keenly recognized by the members. Although she had thought of stepping down from serving in SBHK due to her new commitment to serve God more, she maintained her minimal service at SBHK in order not to shake team spirit and to provide support to her husband, who was still a member.

Ms Cheung thought that active listening skills could be internalized with empathy to foster a natural empathic response to situation. Through her unique experience with clients, she recognized the difficulty for humans to face his/her own shame. She also developed her empathy to understand the difficulty in parenting, despite her authoritative father. Figure 13 below summarizes Ms Cheung's reasons for her long stay in the service.



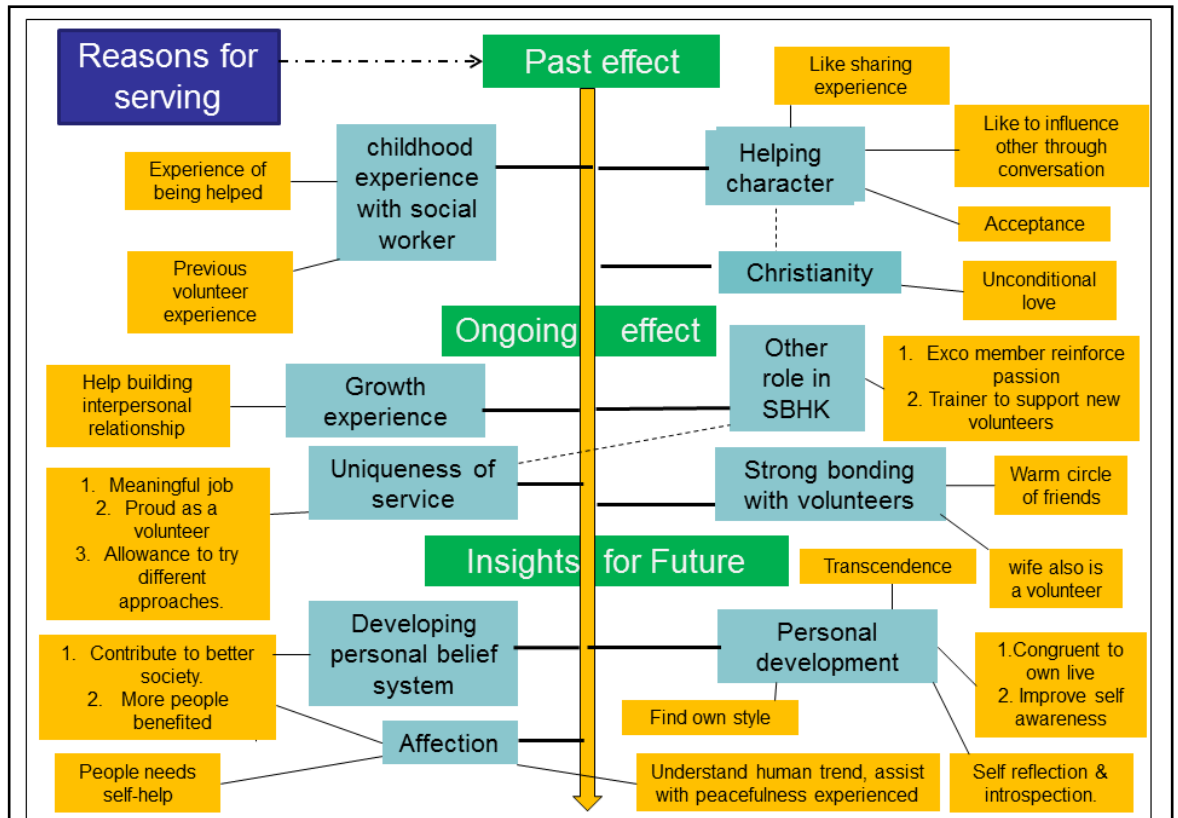
**Figure 13 Summary of Ms Cheung's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK**

## **6.10 Chapter 10 – Stephen**

Stephen was impressed by the social workers who he encountered as a teenager. He was determined to assist youngsters having similar bad experience to his own with his family. His Christian beliefs drove him to care for others and to accept them with unconditional love. He liked to share his experiences with others. He had tried several roles in SBHK, including executive committee member and trainer. All positions reinforced his passion for the service.

He found the work in SBHK meaningful and callers could be benefited by it. Society needed this kind of organization to foster a better society. Therefore, he was proud to be a member. His growth and development presented many occasions for self-reflection, introspection and reflexivity on personal issues and counselling skills. He recognized his own style of serving and selected the skills that were congruent to him. In particular, he liked to train new volunteers and foster their bonding. He has good bonds with teammates and his wife, who is also a member.

He recognized his own development over the years. He had an ability to reflect and transcend. He extended his affection to clients. He understands their needs and wishes to assist them to help themselves. He felt peacefulness in helping clients. Figure 14 below summarizes Stephen's reasons for his long stay in the service.



**Figure 14 Summary of Stephen's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK**

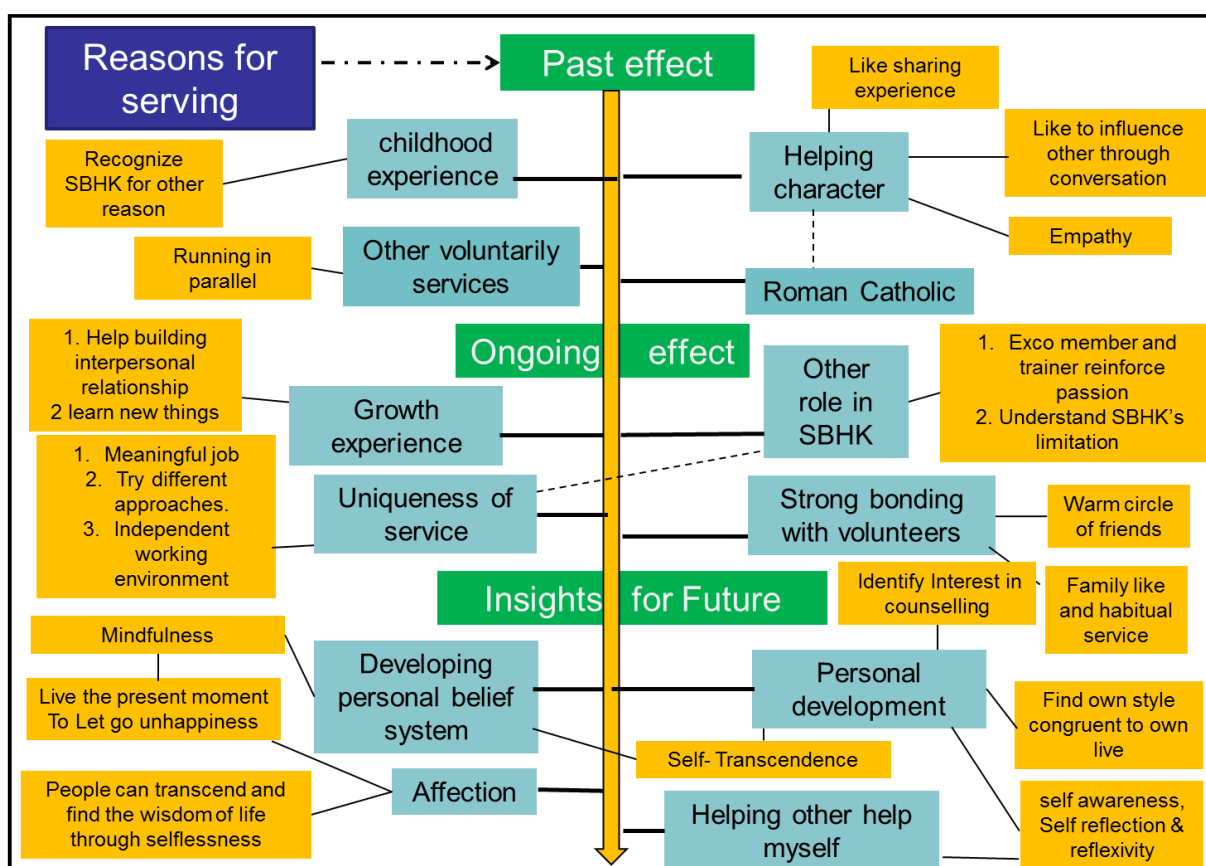
### 6.11 Chapter 11 – Vincent

I came to know SBHK during my childhood, as I had been to its centre for something unrelated to the service. However, I had volunteer experience at other organizations for some time. I had identified my empathic character in my youth. I worked independently at the Hotline and had taken up different roles such as team leader, trainer and executive committee member. Through my experience in different positions on the management committee, I understood the limitations of the organization. However, such experience reinforced my passion for suicide prevention works in society and I had extended my reach to a wider scope of service, from Hotline to life and community education.

I enjoyed the family-like relationship with other volunteers. I reported to service as if I was returning home every week. I considered the service meaningful and also had the liberty to try any newly learned approaches to clients. I had also identified an interest in counselling through taking a Master's degree in counselling.



I gradually recognized my life attitude through continuous self-reflection and reading. I kept on exploring the style of life through mindfulness training and reflection, which was congruent to my being. I acknowledged the fact that serving at SBHK could foster personal growth and development in volunteers. I agreed with the phenomenon of 'helping other helps myself' and, in particular, I wished everyone to transcend themselves and achieve the wisdom of life through the practice of selflessness. I also thought that the regular practice of empathy at the Hotline encouraged volunteers to savour the benefits of being selflessness. Such practice of selflessness is the key to wisdom and self-transcendence. Figure 15 below summarizes the reasons for my long stay in the service.



**Figure 15 Summary of Vincent's reasons for being a long-serving member of SBHK**

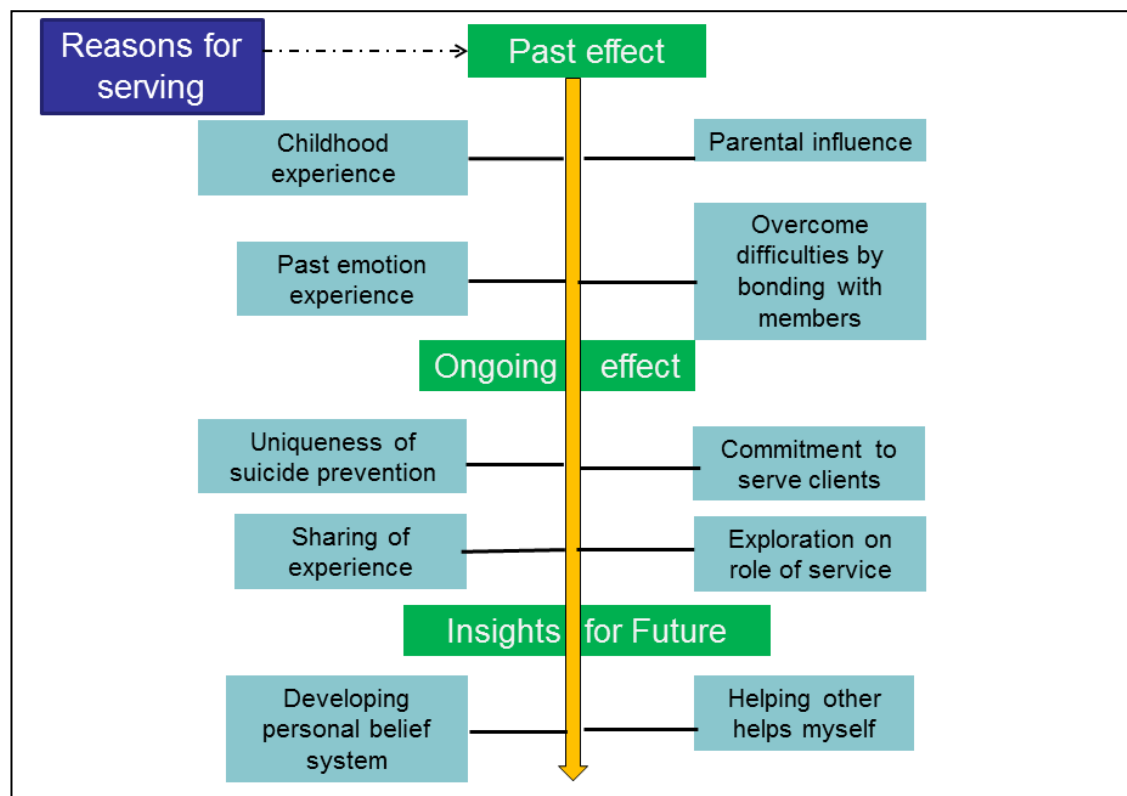
## Chapter 7 Data Analysis

From the data given by the volunteers in Chapters 1 to 11 of the book, I created categories according to the majority input. In general, the major categories included childhood experience, parental influence and past emotional experience. The volunteers experienced a similar environment under the SBHK's flexible management structure for their growth. Although we all had different pre-service backgrounds that brought us to join the service, our experiences within SBHK were to a certain extent similar. We developed our competency from trainee to trainer level, or at least to be able to share our experiences with the next generation of volunteers. We became increasingly integrated with SBHK's requirements for such this suicide prevention service. We treasured our friendships among the volunteers. We even developed our personal life attitudes or belief systems through the service's experience with clients. Finally, according to the stories in the book, most of us shared the view that our experience in handling clients with different emotional problems actually reminded or helped them to face more confidently various aspects of their lives. We benefited from providing the service to others. In Chapter 11, I suggest that our regular practice of empathy enriched our sense of 'selflessness', which stimulated what I consider to be an intrinsic drive towards a state of wisdom. Such a view was reflected by nearly half the participants who, at different levels, were engaging in the study of Buddhism, mindfulness, meditation or dedicated service to a religious or spiritual belief system.

From the literature findings and the data collected from the volunteers, it appears that, apart from the personal interest of the volunteer, whether known to us or not – which might affect their retention – the management style of the organization and its culture contributed to the extent of our stay. Below is my analysis of the findings from three perspectives: volunteers' known interests; organizational factors; and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), as suggested by Aristotle on our intrinsic drive to carry out virtues as an end to being a good person or as a means to something rationally higher for human (becoming a wise one).

## 7.1 Analysis from personal known interest perspective

Figure 16 below summarizes the key categories of reasons for long service in SBHK in terms of volunteers' known interests and experiences.



**Figure 16 Key categories of volunteers' reasons for their long service with SBHK**

### 7.1.1 Generous helping attitude

A number of participants stated their experiences, which reflect a selfless attitude to helping others when seeing them in need. Whether they carried out such action from their religious beliefs or from their own intention to help others, it appears that they have a general attitude to help other without considering the trouble that they might make for themselves. A summary of quotes from the participants can be found in Table 2 below to support this observation:

**Table 2 Helping attitude**

Source	Quote
Jason/Ch 1	One Chinese New Year's Eve some twenty years ago, a policeman brought to SBHK a suicidal client who was suffering from homesickness. By 4 am, I finished the case work, but I had to call off

my tradition of visiting the Chinese New Year floral market with my family, as the market had already closed and had been taken down! It was fortunate that I had the understanding of my family members about skipping this annual activity.

- Jason/Ch 1 I lent \$20 to a client to buy food. Although there was no rule at SBHK to regulate this practice in the early stage, such action was viewed with disquiet by other volunteers and Uncle Chao who was the watchman residing at the centre. Without regret I lent the money to the client.
- Jason/Ch 1 By the nature of the service, we had a common goal to serve people in need. We could share our personal lives and support others.
- Tooyoung/Ch 3 I knew that there was a danger of contracting this deadly disease during the work, but I thought that, since I was getting old and I could die at any time, I had no worries about becoming infected by the disease. As a Christian, I was not afraid of death. I was only afraid of being paralysed in bed; I would be unhappy and should not want to trouble my carers
- Polly/Ch 4 Since I have been a Christian since my secondary schooldays, I follow the caring and loving principles as a Christian in all possible ways. Since becoming a nurse and a Hotline volunteer serve the same goal – to care for other people – the two tasks complement each other....
- The church gave me plenty of chances to love and to listen to others. I enjoyed the process of interacting with people and I gradually understood my own drive and initiative to do so. Perhaps this paved the way to my becoming a helping professional and volunteer on the suicide prevention Hotline.
- Polly/Ch 4 There is a need to help these frustrated parents and therefore I want to staff their Hotline.
- Bonnie/Ch 6 ...she (girl neighbour) needed to take her younger siblings to primary school before she could go to her secondary school. It was difficult for the girl to do so as the travelling time to Hong Kong Island meant she had to leave home very early and she could never manage the task of taking her siblings to school first. When I heard of this, I promised to accompany her siblings to school so that she could study at the good school. As a result, I took the children to school every day for the following five years.
- Bonnie/Ch 6 I had a strong desire to help other people. I can hardly remember some of the experiences. I had sponsored an orphan for five years at Po Leung Kuk, one of the well-established orphanages in Hong Kong, before I joined the Hotline. It was not an adoption, and I paid monthly fees to sponsor the little girl and could visit her regularly. I often took

her for outings. I treated her as my daughter and played with her.

- Bonnie/Ch 6 I encountered another female schoolmate who had a scar between her eyebrows. The scar was caused by her father during an incident of domestic violence. The schoolmate was very depressed and unhappy all the time. She always hid from other students. I tried many times to pacify her but was not successful.
- Robert/Ch 8 Suicide prevention was a great thing to do and that it was one of the things that I could do, under the umbrella of the church, to serve in the community. I expected that I could help people who were in adversity.

Jason called off his traditional family visit to the floral market on Chinese New Year's Eve to support a suicidal client suffering from homesickness. He also personally lent money to a client to meet their needs without obtaining prior approval from the organization. He was always ready to share his personal life and support others. It appeared that the helping attitude of Jason in Chapter 1 was unconditional. He did all this in a natural way, for him. He did not bother to explain to anyone.

Tooyoung talked about her intention to serve AIDS clients. She reported that she had no worries about contracting the deadly disease. As a Christian, she was not afraid of death. She was only afraid of lying paralyzed in bed, as she would be rather unhappy and would not want to trouble her carers. It appeared that she had a unidirectional approach to helping other. Her personal well-being was not her prime consideration. Nevertheless, she gave up the idea of carrying out AIDS service to ease the worry of her parents.

Polly and Robert followed their Christian belief to help others. Being a suicide prevention volunteer served the same purpose as being Christian: to serve others. Polly, with her personal experience having a child with dyslexia, extended her helping attitude towards parents suffering a similar experience. Robert contributed more in terms of organizational management and development at SBHK.

Bonnie demonstrated her independence and selfless attitude in helping her neighbours and classmates during her childhood. She did not feel the inconvenience and helped a neighbouring girl of similar age by bringing her younger brother to school every day for five years in order to allow her to carry out her wish to study at a good

school. In her school life, she tried to pacify a depressed classmate who unfortunately had a scar across her face due to domestic violence. When she finished school and was financially viable, she sponsored an orphan and took her out to play. Her attitude to offering help to others in need was seemingly an effortless part of who she was. However, she did not remember everything she had done in the past, as she felt that she was always lucky to be able to give what she possessed. She was not looking for any reward.

It appears that histories of a helping attitude were demonstrated by some of the volunteers well before they joined SBHK. The services that they provided to suicidal clients might be an extension of their helping attitude.

### *7.1.2 Free or independence childhood*

Three out of eleven participants mentioned their free or independent childhood. Table 3 summarizes what they said about their childhood. Bonnie had spoken about the free childhood provided by her mother, despite the fact that her grandmother did not treat them well due to her traditional views on male social dominance. Mr Lau and Robert mentioned that they needed to solve their problems independently in childhood. This had trained them to be resilient when facing adversity.

**Table 3 Independence in childhood**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Bonnie/Ch 6	My grandmother only treated the men and boys well. Fortunately, given this maltreatment from my grandmother, my mother was very much aware of the consequences of such behaviour. Without falling into the trap of any typical learned-helplessness of a female in a masculine society and becoming depressed, she decided to treat her own children better.
Bonnie/Ch 6	Since the home environment was not appropriate for the whole family to live together, when I was six I moved out to stay with my father until I was twelve. That move left only my mother and my other siblings to live with our grandparents. I witnessed how my father tried to run a number of catering-related businesses but in vain. He opened a bakery and cake shop to sell bread and moon cakes. He set up company to provide an outreach banquet service. My father was not a good businessman and it ended with the collapse of all his businesses.
Mr Lau/ Ch 7	I enjoyed playing on the hillside and rolling marbles with my friends. I was

so independent that I could solve my problems by myself during my childhood.

Robert/ Ch 8 Besides the loss of my father when I was in primary school, my mother passed away when I was in Form 5 (high school level). I was the youngest of six siblings. My next brother was five years older than me. As a result of my mother's death, I received no parental guidance thereafter..... There were ups and downs during that time. Honestly, I was quite lost and confused at that period. However, I was very resilient. I could survive even without remuneration from my business.

Robert became a very independent person due to the early death of his parents and the wide age gap between his siblings. He survived a hard time in his career by diverting his attention to organizing the fortieth anniversary carnival of SBHK. He managed to overcome his greatest difficulties by putting troubles aside and continued to focus on something that he considered meaningful. Similarly, Mr Lau had an independent childhood. He was free to play and this allowed him to face different situations on his own. Bonnie lived alone with her father for some years during her childhood and this also allowed her to become more independent. While she saw the ups and downs of the business of her father, she experienced the emotional variations and the resilience of her father. I think this might have also contributed to her independent personality.

Having to be independent from a young age due to loss, rejection or absence of parental care can have a strong influence on how a person interacts with the world subsequently. That independence can develop into not caring for others or caring very much indeed. The latter would be in the case of someone who develops empathy for those who also suffers loss – a kind of solidarity. The former withdrew from caring, because they fear it, as it might only result in loss.

### *7.1.3 The use of parental authority*

Coincidentally, there were also three volunteers who reported that they had strict, authoritative and conservative parents. Stephen saw the unfair treatment of his father towards his sister and always stood up for her. There were two strict fathers prohibiting their daughters to undertake activities (Ms Cheung from going camping and Tooyoung's father who objected to her joining SBHK as an adult). The reasons for

their objections are not clear, whether it was with good intentions to protect them from being hurt or wasting unnecessary time on something not meaningful to them, or other reasons. Table 4 below summarizes how the volunteers spoke about the use of parental authority:

**Table 4 Use of parental authority**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Tooyoung/Ch 3	My parents... originally did not agree to my serving as a volunteer. I, instead, wished to practise and to teach them how to help others. I wished that they could one day know the philosophy of helping. 'A volunteer gets no money! There is no time to take care of the children!' said my parents.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I was very upset by the refusal. I thought that my father was very unreasonable. As it was the first camp that I was to attend and it was a sort of normal adolescent activity, I decided to go even without his permission. On the day of the camp I waited until my father left for work, I departed for the camp, just leaving a note at home.....I took the opportunity to tell the teacher how I managed to attend the camp and how unreasonable and authoritative my parents were.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I developed empathy towards the authoritative parenting that I had experienced.
Stephen/Ch 10	Stephen was brought up in a family of six siblings. His parents were strict in parenting. For instance, the children were scolded and beaten by their parents if they did not hold their chopsticks properly or if they talked during mealtimes. In addition to the strict house rules, his sisters were treated unequally, due to the tradition in Chinese society. Stephen saw the disharmony and inequality at home. Occasionally, his thoughts urged him to stand against his parents. He would take away the rattan rod to avoid his sisters being beaten by their parents. He would then hide from his parents for some time to avoid confrontation.
Stephen/Ch 10	Though I was not happy with my family relationships, I was enlightened by one social worker who said to me: 'if you find no one loves you, you may replace the resentment by loving others.' I also recall that, when I was at the age of nine, I set myself a goal to be an assertive, honest and valuable person. I was also affected by my class teacher, who was a kind role model to teach me, rather than using the rattan rod (for corporal punishment).  With my personal experience of how to survive disharmony in the family and how to regain my personal confidence through guidance



from social workers, I started to consider contributing more to society.

Stephen/Ch 10      On another occasion when my daughter said to me that I was a good man except when I was angry; and my son once encouraged me and said that 'solutions are always more than problems'. I reflected that I had already influenced my children to think more about their emotions. I believed that it was a good practice for them. They would increase their self-awareness and subsequently both of them could gradually get over any bad influence of any traumatic childhood experience.

I also associate this with the vicious cycle of problematic childhoods that subconsciously drove people to have early and immature marriages. However, those people were usually not mature enough to be parents. They somehow extended their childhood traumas to the next generation by repeating what their parents had done to them. Therefore, I really urge people to think carefully before choosing a spouse and getting married.

Tooyoung cheated her parent by saying that she was going to evening school, rather than tell them that she worked at SBHK. Ms Cheung was angry with her authoritative father who refused her request to go camping, and Stephen was rebellious in confronting the unfair treatment of his father. He could have developed an ideal father in his mind who would not be the same as his father. He then demonstrated, himself, what an ideal father is. This can be seen from his present parent-child relationship. Both Ms Cheung and Stephen had learned the shortfalls of their parents and developed empathetic hearts towards others and their own children. By understanding the nature of unpleasant events, they developed their empathy.

This echoed the situation for the development of independent children through loss or refusal, as mentioned in section 7.1.2 above. The outcomes of childhood hardship or suffering could be positive.

#### *7.1.4 Peer group introduction*

Three female volunteers were actually recommended by friends, who were ex-members of SBHK, to consider joining the service, as in Table 5. Perhaps, to a certain extent, their friends knew something about their characters before making such a recommendation.

**Table 5 Introduction by ex-members**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Han/Ch 2	I had no idea in my mind of joining a particular kind of social service. However, I have a friend who served as volunteer before on the SBHK Hotline. The friend suggested SBHK to me without much thought and I applied to be a volunteer.
Tooyoung/ Ch 3	One day, Lee (ex-member) said to me that I needed to do ‘something’ and persuaded me to join the suicide prevention Hotline of SBHK as she was one of the members. Lee even filled in the application form for me to sign. With a strong push from her, I joined the year-long training course and started my service as a Hotline volunteer.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	Later, one of my friends, who was a volunteer in SBHK, told me that SBHK used active listening skills to help clients. On another occasion, I saw the recruitment advertisement of SBHK and therefore I applied as a volunteer.

No doubt, ex-members of SBHK understood the nature of service at the suicide prevention hotline, so they understood what sorts of volunteer were required. They recommended suitable persons to join the service according to their observations. Nearly a third of the long-serving volunteers were recommended by ex-members. This might be an indication that a clear understanding of the nature and commitment of the service is an important factor in choosing the right volunteers. At least, through an introduction by ex-members, many of the misunderstandings or inaccurate perceptions of the service can be clarified before a person applies.

To a certain extent, this point was echoed by Hyde et al. (2016), who proposed strategies to promote satisfaction, social connections and organizational commitment to encourage evolution through novice and transition stage. Measures such as providing sufficient information about the roles of volunteer and the environment, entertainment or timing might affect volunteers’ satisfaction. An expansion of this social connection through a ‘buddy’ system, involving novices and experienced volunteers, could be attempted. Organizational transparency and information regarding expenditure of funding may strengthen transition and sustained volunteer commitment. The involvement of ex-members might help, acting as a ‘buddy’ outside of SBHK who could help to provide sufficient information for potential volunteers even

prior to their joining the service. As a result of a clear or better understanding of the service, their expectation of obtaining satisfaction through the existing policies or facilities of the service would be addressed and the chances of their staying with the service would be deemed higher.

#### *7.1.5 Past emotional experience*

Two volunteers had personally encountered cases of suicide, and recognized their lack of experience and skill in handling suicidal persons. Two volunteers had been helped by a teacher or a social worker in their childhood to face their adversity. Such experiences had drawn their attention towards the positive attitude of helping services.

**Table 6 Emotional experience**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Joyce/Ch 5	Two years before I joined SBHK, I was told by one of my former colleagues that one of the students had committed suicide. My immediate reaction to this tragic incident was a feeling of guilt. I felt guilty that I had not dealt with the problem of this student as it was known to me at the time when I was teaching there.
Bonnie/Ch 6	Although I was not in contact with her after school, I heard of the tragic news about them: At the age of 30, this schoolmate was too tired of taking caring of her paralysed mother. She poisoned her to death and then committed suicide by hanging herself. It was a shock to me to learn about this but it further enhances my thought that I am a fortunate person in comparison with many other people in society.
Bonnie/Ch 6	I am a physically and mentally healthy person and I wish to share my 'good' things and my time with my clients. By 'good' things, I mean the fact that I am not an unfortunate person compared with others. I felt satisfied with my status when I was young.  Helped by a teacher or a social worker before joining.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I was very surprised and impressed by the effectiveness of the listening skill demonstrated by my teacher. I had had a personal experience of what it would be like to relieve a person's anxiety. I then decided to learn this listening skill and I determined to become a social worker after graduation.
Stephen/Ch 10	As a result of the disharmony at home, very often I went to the library at Caritas Youth Centre to study and the YMCA Youth Centre for leisure time activities.... It was in the Youth Centres that I came across some priests and social workers. My experience of the centres was

positive.

Joyce was shocked to hear about the suicide of her ex-student, as was Bonnie about the tragedy of her ex-classmate. As a result of the experience, Joyce had reflected that her guilty feeling might have subconsciously driven her to learn more about suicide prevention skills. Bonnie's idea was more positive in the sense that, because of the experience, she felt that she was a more fortunate person to be able to help less fortunate people.

Ms Cheung and Stephen were benefited by the emotional aids provided by their teacher and social worker, respectively, to understand the importance of good helping attitudes. They then developed their interest in pursuing these helping skills.

It appears that, under certain conditions, past emotional experiences might have a positive influence on the development of people. Although there are people who might not be able to recover from emotional experience, those who survived might have a better drive to make good use of that experience. Hence, understanding the background behind a potential volunteer at the recruitment stage might provide an insight into their loyalty to the service. Besides, if someone could survive a past emotional experience, their resilience in overcoming their difficulties might increase their empathy level to understand people in similar situations.

In fact, helping strangers is one of the best ways for people to recover from childhood adversity (Young-Eisendrath, 1996).

The confidentiality of the service contributed to the perception of secrecy that the public has about the service. However, all members were unequivocal about the value of the service and were committed to serving the public. Other members commented that it gave out love. It looked like a self-perpetuating service that is driven by its goal and nature. Table 7 below summarizes the quotes on their view on confidentiality, meaningfulness and the challenge of the service.

#### *7.1.6 Suicide prevention as a meaningful and challenging task*

**Table 7 Confidentiality, meaningfulness and challenge of the service**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Jason/Ch 1	Another challenge that I recall, in particular, was the requirement to keep case information confidential. This contributed to the uniqueness of this suicide prevention hotline service; that is, the mysterious nature of the service in the eyes of the public. Since volunteers were obliged not to disclose the content and personal data of clients to the public, the service was deemed secretive.....I have followed the confidential principle strictly over the years. I have not disclosed details of the cases that I have handled even in this interview!
Mr Lau/Ch 7	<p>I apply the same rule of confidentiality in my working environment as in SBHK with my clients. This is extremely important for setting up a safe atmosphere between two persons in communication, especially for ladies. I am good at this kind of self-discipline and have earned a reputation as a good listener in my office.</p> <p>Meaningful service</p>
Tooyoung/Ch 3	I chose SBHK as I agree with its core values to serve strangers without any prerequisites... I believe that as long as SBHK checks me out with the tests, there is no harm in me serving.
Tooyoung/Ch 3	While a Samaritan Befriender is on duty, they listen to calls impartially. SBHK listens to anyone, as they might not have friends. I think that the philosophy of SBHK matches my own, which is to serve people in need. This is one of the most important reasons that keeps me at SBHK, as well as its true value and why it has been going for so long.
Polly/Ch 4	I will remain in the service as it is a meaningful task.
Mr Lau/Ch 7	So long as there are clients in society who need our service, I have the incentive to stay with the service. It is my desire to serve the clients, trying to pacify them when they feel depressed, sad or even suicidal.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	The Hotline service is meaningful to the client. ...Together, we try to examine the difficulties and to explore further options for overcoming the difficulties. From time to time we find light at the end of the tunnel.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	This experience reinforced my belief about the importance of the Hotline service. It might be difficult for a person to face their shame openly.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I have been in the service for over thirty years. I considered the service meaningful to clients and to volunteers.
Stephen/ Ch 10	I view the Hotline as a convenient means to deliver love and care to society. Though I am not a follower of any religion, I treasure the

	chance to spread the message of love in people's daily lives. The more love in society, the better.
Stephen/Ch 10	<p>I considered the Hotline service as a way means for reflection. The reflection is not only for the clients but also for the volunteers. While clients had reflected during and after the conversation, I also had my own reflections</p> <p>Love and Self-perpetual service</p>
Mr Lau/Ch 7	With my desire to help people to understand their own capability in handling their problems, my drive for continuous learning through using listening and counselling skills, plus my positive reinforcement through my Hotline service and my personal life experience means that I shall continue to help with the Hotline as a self-perpetuating service.
Stephen/Ch 10	<p>I view the Hotline as a convenient means to deliver love and care to society. Though I am not a follower of any religion, I treasure the chance to spread the message of love in people's daily lives. The more love in society, the better.</p> <p>Challenging task</p>
Jason/Ch 1	I have experienced many challenges during my service. One Chinese New Year's Eve some twenty years ago, a policeman brought to SBHK a suicidal client who was suffering from homesickness. By 4 am I finished the case work but I had to call off my tradition of visiting the Chinese New Year floral market with my...
Jason/Ch 1	Another challenge that I recall in particular was the requirement to keep case information confidential... In retrospect, I think that the challenges that I have encountered have reinforced my determination to stay in the service.
Tooyoung/ Ch 3	There might be a violent act, such as by people who sit on a rooftop yelling to that they will jump. They might be speaking on the phone while when they are about to commit suicide. I would not know how to handle such an overwhelming situation. I would not be happy to handle high-risk cases. A, although I might appreciate it if I found that I was able to handle them properly. I might also feel incompetent if I could not persuade the client to save their life.
Polly/Ch 4	Experience with high-risk clients does not motivate me to stay with the service.
Robert/Ch 8	The second challenge for me was the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of SBHK in 2000. With a mind to welcoming changes and being creative, SBHK decided to organize a carnival in the open square of the New Town Plaza next to Sha Tin Railway Station.

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Robert/Ch 8   | To me, suicide prevention has never ceased to be a challenge. It is a difficult problem with no known targets. Suicide prevention work is not addressed at any particular group. A person who is not a target today might become a target tomorrow.   |
| Vincent/Ch 11 | There were more opportunities and challenges for me, as an amateur, to discuss suicide prevention issues with government officials, professionals, academics and the mass media.  |
| Vincent/Ch 11 | I was quite willing to take up the role when such challenges arose. I recalled that on one occasion, when Dr Philips Nitschke from Australia, the so-called 'Doctor Death', came to Hong Kong appealing for support for euthanasia, I met him on three consecutive days, debating with him at a press conference, a live TV programme and at a church forum on the issue. Although I was willing to gather information to support our position that life is precious and euthanasia should not be considered, it was still a very big challenge for me. |
| Vincent/Ch 11 | Although I was one of the Exco members, I did not feel that I contributed much to the Exco. Things changed a bit when we started to organize the new the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) and Life Education Center (LEC) SCIC and LEC, as well as when I took up the public relations matters for the Exco. I felt charged with more energy to work with my counterparts.   |

Most of the volunteers agreed that the perceived meaningfulness of the service continued to drive their stay at the service (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Gidron, 1985). Mr Lau even said that so long as there are clients who need the service, he would continue to serve without hesitation. Such a perception of the meaningfulness of the service has been maintained in them since the beginning of the service and has remained an important factor for them, whether at a beginning, transition or sustained stage of service. The sense of responsibility of the volunteers, which is in alignment or agreement with organizational and individual intention, is important for the retention of volunteers (Sokolowski, 1996).

Helping strangers with their suicidal emotions and keep information confidential requires a high level of devotion and self-discipline. The greater the challenge and responsibility that the task demands (Lammers, 1991), the more interest and satisfaction that volunteers attain during the process (March and Simon, 1958), hence the longer they stay. Facing challenges has become a reinforcement factor for their staying in service. I note that it is again a selfless behaviour in the volunteers to protect

the privacy of the clients by complying with the confidentiality agreement not to talk casually about the cases that they handle. It is a selfless act of self-constraint.

### 7.1.7 *Self-oriented or other-oriented motives*

It is difficult to distinguish whether to perform something meaningful for the sole goal of serving the community acts as an other-oriented motive by the sustained volunteer (Handy et al., 2006) which can be interpreted as purely for altruistic reasons (Alexander, 2000), or is to acquire a feeling of satisfaction or happiness (March and Simon, 1958) during the process, which is a self-oriented motive.

Table 8 below summarizes the quotes on self or other-oriented motivation:

**Table 8 Summary of the quotes on self or other-oriented motivations**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Han/Ch 2	I felt derive satisfaction from the process of helping others, perhaps especially in clarifying messy situations.
Han/Ch 2	I feel satisfaction from my service through my interaction with clients and trainees. Although I might not feel satisfaction after every client, in general I feel that I am satisfied with my interactions.
Han/Ch 2	It is the effect of my relationship and conversation with clients, their responses and the ability to maintain my goals in the process that satisfies me. I have found that I can help other people.
Han/Ch 2	It resembles the situation when I help emotionally confused clients to reorganize their thoughts and feelings; they end up with emotional relief. Indeed, I derive satisfaction from the process of helping others
Tooyoung/Ch 3	When I listen to calls, I feel that my life is not as bad as that of others... I feel satisfied as an ordinary person.
Bonnie/Ch 6	Despite my independent character, I attribute three reasons for my staying such a long time in SBHK. These are friendship, clients and keeping pace and being updated in society. ...It interests me to learn more about society and I am eager to listen to my friends and clients.
Mr Lau/Ch 7	Another benefit for me to stay in the service is to keep my brain ticking over. The practice of active listening skills and the provision of empathetic responses to clients demand a quick processing of my mind. I suspect that such service would prevent me from developing dementia!



Mr Lau/Ch 7	I also find that, by practising in the Hotline, I am benefited from touching with the pace of society. By responding to the problems posed by clients, I feel the change in the culture of Hong Kong.
Robert/Ch 8	Although I have felt a little happiness after successfully talking to a client, this might not be the only source of energy that has maintained my service.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	By learning the experience of the clients, I learn how to care and to understand a person under such difficult situation and, more importantly, I recognize how important it is to avoid positioning myself in such a situation.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I do not deny that I have obtained some satisfaction from the service. The satisfaction has been felt after I have managed a case smoothly and clients were benefited by the conversation.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	In my determination to provide the ideal ingredients for the marriage regardless of the arguably selfish nature of providing minimal service to SBHK, I tried my best to stay with him.  Other-oriented motive.
Han/Ch 2	Another satisfaction that I have experienced is from volunteer training. It is another feeling of being able to help, although this time the target is the trainees, not the clients
Tooyoung/Ch 3	The philosophy of SBHK matches my own which is to serve people in need. This is one of the most important reasons that keeps me at SBHK as well as its true value and, why it has been going for so long....In retrospect, I notice a strong sense of commitment to the service. It is this sense of commitment to serve others that keeps me in the service.
Polly/Ch 4	I feel satisfied if the client can reflect after our conversation.
Joyce/Ch 5	I feel job satisfaction on most OND shifts when I notice that clients have benefited from the conversation.
Bonnie/Ch 6	Despite my independent character, I attribute three reasons for my staying such a long time in SBHK. These are friendship, clients, and keeping pace and being updated in the latest changes of society.
Bonnie/Ch 6	If I feel that a client can benefit from our conversation, I have some satisfaction.
Mr Lau/ Ch 7	So long as there are clients in society who need our service, I have the incentive to stay with the service. It is my desire to serve the clients, trying to pacify them when they feel depressed, sad or even suicidal.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	The satisfaction has been felt after I have managed a case smoothly and clients were benefited by the conversation.

Ms Cheung/Ch 9 If one of us left, there might be a breakdown in the bond, with more and more volunteers leaving. Perhaps, this sort of mutual bonding was tacitly affecting each team member to maintain the full force of the team.

Several volunteers, such as Han, Robert and Ms Cheung, expressed their satisfaction as a self-oriented motive through their achievement of proper or smooth interaction with clients. In addition, Tooyoung felt the achievement as an ordinary human being through the process of helping others.

Others volunteers also reported their satisfaction in fulfilling self-oriented motives such as being able to benefit by keeping in touch with the pace of society (Bonnie and Mr Lau), keeping their brain functioning (Mr Lau) or even protecting a marriage relationship (Ms Cheung). Some long-serving volunteers possessed such self-oriented motives.

Rubin and Thorelli (1984) found that, whether or not instrumental motives were fulfilled, the number of such motives for volunteering was not positively related to long service. Mesch et al. (1998) added that if instrumental motives, which are career related, are left unmet, volunteers leave the service. However, when they acquire the desired instrumental rewards, they also leave. Therefore, such career-related motivations will decrease retention, in general. The long service of our participants was apparently unaffected by such motives, despite some of them reporting having benefited in their career by the experience in SBHK.

There were more volunteers reporting satisfaction through fulfilling their other-oriented motives. For instance, Han reported that she felt satisfaction even in her role as a trainer by helping new recruits. Tooyoung reported that her strong sense of commitment to helping others had kept her in the service. Polly, in Chapter 4, felt satisfaction if she could stimulate clients to undertake self-reflection. In fact, some volunteers (Polly, Joyce, Bonne and Ms Cheung) mentioned that their satisfaction came from seeing the clients being helped or feeling that the clients could grow and develop after their conversation. This matches the hypothesis by Morrow-Howell and Mui (1989), as volunteers were expected to quit if they found that they were unable to

help as much as they thought they could or that the people whom they were trying to help did not respond favourably.

It is interesting to note that, while most participants' other-oriented motives involved the benefit of clients, two volunteers included the benefit to SBHK: Han for the benefit of trainees and Ms Cheung for the stability of other team members in the service. In addition, three volunteers expressed both self- and other-oriented motives. While Han and Bonnie treasured their learning opportunities, Ms Cheung, particularly, had the more personal motive of protecting her marriage by remaining with the service. Hence, Mesch et al. (1998) were right to say that the motivation of most volunteers is neither strictly altruistic nor egoistic. It really varies with the individual volunteer.

#### *7.1.8 Devotion to clients*

It may be due to the serious nature of the service that these SBHK volunteers were devoted to helping clients. They were prepared to commit extra time to clients rather than their families. Despite the fact that some of them kept on studying after work for personal or career advancement, they continued to serve unceasingly. There is a clear sense of devotion, which is important in maintaining their perseverance in serving SBHK.

As mentioned in item 7.1.7 above, most members wished not only to prevent suicide but to promote growth of the clients through their telephone conversations, and this was done through giving them a quality response and time. They felt satisfied when they felt that the clients could be benefited by the conversation. They accepted the challenge of dealing with the various types of clients that they encountered as one of the reinforcement factors for staying with the service (Item 7.1.6 above). The initiative of extra overnight duty (the Samaritans Beyond) or further self-learning on counselling skills by five volunteers are not only evidence of their commitment to their service obligation, but also their willingness to dedicate extra efforts and time for the benefit of clients. This is what Guest (1992) considered as attitudinal commitment, where volunteers offer loyalty and are willing to give their time to the organization. Table 9 summarizes the quotes of the extra effort that volunteers put in at the service:

**Table 9 Summary of quotes on the extra effort that volunteers made for the service**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Polly/Ch 4	After I completed the Master's degree in counselling, I felt that I had a better grasp of various Counselling skills. With more knowledge, I understand that I have more options in my approach, which results in a more fruitful experience with clients. I acknowledge more and more the importance of sharing my experience. Since I have benefited from serving in SBHK, I hope that I can contribute more to assisting new members.
Joyce/Ch 5	In five years' time, I obtained a Bachelor degree in psychology and a Master's degree in counselling. These have provided me with the right materials and confidence to face the public when discussing suicide or counselling issues.
Stephen/Ch 10	In late 1997, I and several other volunteers joined the first Master of Arts in Work-Based Learning (Counselling Studies) course, which was jointly organized by SBHK and Middlesex University in the United Kingdom. The course reminded me of finding an approach that was most suitable for individual counsellors. With this in mind, after my graduation from the Master's course, I decided to deepen my counselling skills with integration of client-centre therapy, the SATIR model, behavioural and narrative approaches.
Vincent/Ch 11	In 2007, SBHK was successful in collaborating with the Hong Kong Center of Middlesex University in the United Kingdom to run a Master of Arts in Work-Based Learning (Counselling) course. Together with eight other volunteers and some non-SBHK students, we embarked on the two-year journey of the inaugural course.
Vincent/Ch 11	As it was approaching year 2000, I named the group ' <i>The Samaritans Beyond</i> '. I remembered that there were about one hundred members on the volunteer contact list. I called them up one by one and told them about the philosophy of the ' <i>Samaritan Beyond</i> ' and asked for their support to report for OND once per month regardless of their marital status and gender. About 15 of them responded to my appeal and started their extra service.  Desire to stay in the service.
Jason/Ch 1	I was still happy to fulfill the minimum requirements for attendance to maintain my membership and to help other people.
Han/Ch 2	However, my reasonable commitment and resilience allowed me to overcome this hurdle, and I was able to provide an uninterrupted service to the community.

Han/Ch 2	Unless there is a major change in my life, such as changes in family life that results in my having less spare time available for me, I will continue with my service.
Tooyoung/Ch 3	I think that the philosophy of SBHK matches my own, which is to serve people in need. This is one of the most important reasons that keeps me at SBHK, as well as its true value and why it has been going for so long.
Polly/Ch 4	I will remain in the service as it is a meaningful task.
Joyce/Ch 5	Perhaps I will not leave SBHK so long as I can take the overnight shift!
Bonnie/Ch 6	I care about the environment, public policy and utilities that affect the lives of citizens. It interests me to learn more about society and I am eager to listen to my friends and clients.
Mr Lau/Ch 7	I am self-contained and I can sustain my energy to stay in the service by my continuous exploration and experience in providing the service. Unless there is drastic change in my career or family life, I would not consider leaving the service.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I have been in the service for over thirty years. I considered the service meaningful to clients and to volunteers.
Stephen/Ch 10	From a wider perspective, I viewed the Hotline as a convenient means to deliver love and care to society. Though I was not a follower of any religion, I treasured the chance to spread the message of love in people's daily lives. The more love in society, the better.
Stephen/Ch 10	I consider the Hotline service as a means for reflection. The reflection is not only for the clients but also for the volunteers. While clients reflected during and after the conversation, I also have my own reflections.

I have no hesitation in using the word devotion to describe this commitment to volunteers' clients. Comparable to the finding by Handy (2006), long-term committed Samaritan volunteers are more other-oriented than self-oriented in terms of their personal satisfaction. They are willing to sacrifice more than their time to accomplish the task better (Guest, 1992).

Very similar to the results of Griffin and Bateman (1996), the three elements of commitment are not difficult to discover in the Samaritan volunteers, namely a desire to maintain their membership (Table 9, above); acceptance of the values and goals of

the organizations (section 7.1.7); and a willingness to contribute efforts on behalf of the organization (this section).

There is no doubt that suicide prevention work is a meaningful job. The year-long hardship of undergoing training and finally gaining acceptance after a year of assessment before being considered a fully qualified volunteer enabled them to treasure and understand their important role in maintaining an efficient and dedicated service. The volunteers, in general, felt proud to be members of SBHK, although it is not any easy task to maintain this membership. As McCudden (2000) stated, volunteers wanted to be proud of the organization on a local or international level and to feel part of a successful enterprise. I think that the latest growth of SBHK to its present size, with different centres and staff levels, has contributed to its unique position in suicide prevention services in Hong Kong. This provides pride and dignity to its volunteers serving the organization. As Polly mentioned in Chapter 4, although she was not interested in administration or management, she would still have a voice in any management decision that, she felt, could be inappropriate for the organization. Similar to Han in Chapter 2 and Ms Cheung in Chapter 9, she does not only care for the clients but the whole organization as well. Volunteers treasure their social status as a suicide prevention volunteer, despite the fact they might not have any occasion to talk about their service in public (Table 9 above). Frankl's logotherapy (1963) proved how people can tolerate suffering if they know the reason or meaning of the suffering. To serve, to love and to help clients are basically selfless behaviours. This goal precludes hardship or minor suffering. Alternatively, it accounts for their perseverance in providing long service.

#### *7.1.9 Trainer or sharing experience with other volunteers*

Most members like to help in training volunteers. They consider this as a refresher or reminder of their skills and an opportunity for reflection. Others like sharing their experience in an informal setting. Most of them are generous in sharing their knowledge and experience. However, such opportunities for sharing and teaching have to be structurally available within the organization in order to facilitate an individual's desire for teaching or sharing. Table 10 summarizes the quotes by volunteers on their

desire for training or sharing experiences with other members and how they treasure the chance for reflection on the service:

**Table 10 Summary of quotes on training and sharing experience**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Han/Ch 2	Unlike other group leaders, I did not want to become an Exco member. Instead, I became more active in volunteer training. I like to help out in various training courses for new volunteers.
Han/Ch 2	Another satisfaction that I have experienced is from volunteer training. It is another feeling of being able to help, although this time the target is the trainees, not the clients.
Polly/Ch 4	I completed a Master's degree course in counselling that was jointly run by the SBHK and Middlesex University, and thought that it was about time for me to assist in training. In the past, I preferred spending time with my children and listening to the Hotline to extra work such as training new volunteers.
Polly/Ch 4	If I could share more experiences with new members and if they could benefit from them, there would be more trained workers to listen to calls and so more clients would be benefited. That is why I am making available more time to assist in training, especially on case supervision and in leading recruits for role-play activities.
Polly/Ch 4	As the turnover rate for volunteers is still high, it is best to retain the steady volunteers or provide them with more input during training. It would promote their sense of belonging and wanting to stay with SBHK. If I could share more experiences with new members and if they could benefit from them, there would be more trained workers to listen to calls and so more clients would be benefited.
Joyce/Ch 5	I decided to follow the path that led to management work in SBHK. I consider running SBHK to be of equal importance as manning the frontline services. Training, publishing and promotional work are all activities that promote suicide prevention.
Bonnie/Ch 6	I always take the opportunity to supervise my Hotline volunteer trainees to remind myself that patience is required. By listening to the trainees' work and the discussions with them afterwards, I find new energy to refresh myself with regards to the attitude and skills required in the service.
Mr Lau/Ch 7	I share my experiences both in my personal life and in SBHK. I tried to pass on practical skills to the younger generations about how to handle certain clients. These skills include noting and controlling the speed of speech of the client; paying attention to emotional words; controlling

my own curiosity by not asking unnecessary questions; listening carefully instead of applying any unnecessary psychological knowledge; and focusing on the unhappy incidents rather than the process of how clients became unhappy.

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| Robert/Ch 8   | I am always prepared to return to the telephone booth. Every few years I go back as a helper in recruit training and try to refresh my active listening skills.  |
| Stephen/Ch 10 | I was also involved in helping with the Hotline training arrangements. I later became one of the Exco members focusing on volunteer training.  |
|               | Reflection   |
| Han/Ch 2      | It is better for volunteers to share their experience and feelings after listening to calls. Such sharing among volunteers encourages them to reflect on what has happened and what improvements could be made.  |
| Han/Ch 2      | Frankly, I might not proceed with such reflection if I did not take part in this training activity. I would not reflect without a good reason for so doing. The training provides a stimulus for me. During past training sessions, I observed that some trainees were very eager to learn. They demonstrated a high level of interest in the topics. I was very pleased to see this         |
| Han/Ch 2      | Monitoring the live calls received by trainees is also beneficial for me. I need to be more analytical in conceptualizing the personality of the client. Together with the role-play exercises, it requires more acute listening skills from me to be able to clear my own mind and then to comment on the performance of the trainees. Again, it provides more chances for self-reflection. |
| Tooyoung/Ch 3 | Through ongoing self-reflection, I learn many things that are helpful to my life. I discovered the magic of helping others at an early stage volunteering.   |
| Tooyoung/Ch 3 | I reflected a great deal on the completion of the case, despite being satisfied with my overall handling.  |
| Tooyoung/Ch 3 | It is a personal growth process to communicate with the clients. I have accumulated listening skills and have more confidence in handling different cases. I reflect after listening to calls, such as on how I could do better.   |
| Polly/Ch 4    | The management post provided me with a new chance to reflect on my listening skills.   |
| Polly/Ch 4    | I recognize that there has been a positive change in my perception and sensitivity which allows me to see more chances to reflect on relevant concepts with clients, and this often changes the result of the  |



conversation.

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Bonnie/Ch 6   | I also reflect on my handling and seek support from others. I always read through the case references more carefully to understand how clients can be handled better.   |
| Stephen/Ch 10 | I mentioned before that I reflected not only after conversations with clients. In fact, with different types of counselling knowledge in mind, I did much reflection in my daily life.  |
| Stephen/Ch 10 | I considered the Hotline service as a means for reflection. The reflection is not only for the clients but also for the volunteers. While clients reflected during and after the conversation, I also had my own reflections. |
| Stephen/Ch 10 | I reflected that life is always so unpredictable and we have to live with this.   |

Volunteers generally took the opportunity of being trainers to help them to reflect on their own skills. According to Ardelt and Oh (2010), reflection is a key element in obtaining wisdom, whether in the Eastern or the Western world. The regular reflection by volunteers gives some hints that they have an internal or intrinsic drive to seek for wisdom.

#### *7.1.10 Exploring personal potential*

The chance for members to be group leaders (for four volunteers), trainers (for nearly all) or Exco members (for five of them) provides a chance for members to explore their potential. Most members were pleased to have taken different positions so that they could try different tasks. They treasured the chance of learning, whether it was formal academic learning or experience sharing. Sometimes, these chances actually fostered a major life change for them. For instance, after being an Exco member, some volunteers (Polly, Joyce, Mr Lau, Stephen and I) found an interest in counselling, and undertook study and practised different types of counselling skills. Table 11 below summarizes the experience of volunteers in non-Hotline roles.

**Table 11 Summary of experience of volunteers in non-Hotline roles**

Source	Quote
Jason/Ch 1	I have been a group leader and executive committee (Exco) member. To be a group leader in the past was not easy as at present.

Han/Ch 2	During my stay with the Friday team, I was stable in my volunteer work. In fact, I was the group leader for two to three years... Unlike other group leaders, I did not pursue to want to become an Exco member. Instead, I became more active in volunteer training.
Tooyoung/Ch 3	I did not take up any management role at SBHK as there is more demand for frontline work. I have been a group leader twice and now only want to participate in frontline duty.
Joyce/Ch 5	Coincidentally, one of the group leaders during that time, Mr Yim, asked me to be the secretary of the group leaders' meeting. I accepted the task, not knowing how it would affect my whole life.
Joyce/Ch 5	I volunteered to be an Exco member. As the Exco election took place every two years, I experienced several posts; Public Relations Officer, Publishing Officer, Training officer and Vice-Chairperson.
Joyce/Ch 5	In 2011, I re-joined the Exco to oversee the Hotline and to maintain my minimum commitment to OND.
Robert/Ch 8	In 1996, I was somehow elected as group leader of the Thursday group.
Robert/Ch 8	In 1999 I joined Exco and became the chairman of SBHK. Although I took up the top management role of SBHK, I continued to listen to Hotline calls until 2005.
Stephen/Ch 10	I later became one of the Exco members focusing on volunteer training.
Vincent/ Ch 11	In July 1999, when I joined the Exco as secretary,
Vincent/Ch 11	It was only when I became a Group Leader at the Shun Lee Centre that I started to learn more about the Exco as Group Leaders had regular Group Leader Meetings with the Exco members attending
Vincent/Ch 11	In fact, as an Exco member, I looked at suicide prevention from a wider perspective.
	Counselling Studies
Polly/Ch 4	I can feel my change of thought. After I completed the Master's degree in counselling, I felt that I had a better grasp of various counselling skills. With more knowledge, I understand that I have more options in my approach, which results in a more fruitful experience with clients.
Joyce/Ch 5	In five years' time, I obtained a Bachelor degree in psychology and a Master's degree in counselling. These have provided me with the right materials and confidence to face the public when discussing suicide or Counselling issues.
Mr Lau/Ch 7	Perhaps I have a non-complacent attitude for the benefit of my client

which drives me to acquire more Counselling skills to carry on my voluntary service. About ten years ago as a result of some in-house training courses, I learned about Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

- Stephen/Ch 10      In late 1997, I and several other volunteers joined the first Master of Arts in Work-Based Learning (Counselling Studies) course, which was jointly organized by SBHK and Middlesex University in the United Kingdom. The course reminded me of finding an approach that was most suitable for individual counsellors. With this in mind, after my graduation from the Master's course, I decided to deepen my counselling skills with integration of client-centre therapy, the SATIR model, behavioural and narrative approaches.
- Vincent/Ch 11      Together with eight other volunteers and some non-SBHK students, we embarked on the two-year journey of the inaugural course. It was a fruitful experience for me to attend the course, as I found out that I really enjoyed studying counselling and psychology. I also changed from a non-book reader to a book chaser. When I read some materials that I found interesting and wanted to explore more, I looked for the source of the information through the references and bibliography, and tried to read the original texts to understand their exact meaning. In retrospect, it was this change of attitude and interest in reading books that changed my life.

Through their involvement with Exco, other volunteers have discovered their interest and ability in training (Joyce, Stephen), management (Joyce, Robert, Stephen and I) or corporate communication (Joyce and I). Volunteers, in general, have the freedom and opportunity to test their own ability and capacity at SBHK. Niyazi (1996) stated that volunteers need to be managed in a supportive, developmental and appreciative way in order to remain in the organization. SBHK does provide this organizational structure for the mutual benefit of the organization and the volunteers.

To grow and to develop in a good direction is intrinsic to every person. Although the path might be different for different people, the perseverance to strive for the best performance and to explore one's own ability needs courage and bravery. There might be emotional fluctuations during the process, but it is worthwhile and natural for people to want to explore their potential freely. It appears that SBHK provides a platform for its members to explore their potential or interests. This arrangement is quite different from any other commercial organization, where staff might not have

equal opportunities to explore new directions or achieve their potential in different ways.

#### *7.1.11 Helping others helps myself*

Members said that they acquired a wide range of knowledge from the service. They could understand the pace of life of Hong Kong people better (Jason, Bonnie and Mr Lau). The knowledge that they acquired on counselling (Stephen and I), handling emergency situations (Jason) or even other professional knowledge was helpful to them (Jason).

Some volunteers reported that the interaction with clients reminded them not to get into the same situation as the client. It made them act with more caution in their own life, for instance to prevent extramarital affairs (Ms Cheung) or rumination on depressive emotions (Joyce). They grew with SBHK in understanding more about human behaviour throughout the service. Table 12 summarizes the quotes on this aspect:

**Table 12 Summary of quotes on 'helping others helps myself'**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Jason/Ch 1	Although there was no formal training system, this sort of briefing provided me and other volunteers with much other knowledge beyond our own professions. I thought that this kind of knowledge enriched my life a great deal.
Jason/Ch 1	I reflected that it was this challenging experience in SBHK had contributed to my ability to stay calm in any emergency. I was pleased to see this development in myself.
Polly/Ch 4	I summarize my experience on the Hotline as 'helping others helps myself', as I always find it beneficial, working there. When I listen to a client during a conversation, I find new enlightenment in my life. Through ongoing self-reflection, I learn many things that are helpful to my life.
Joyce/Ch 5	Similarly, I found myself suitable for Public Relations work especially in handling media enquiries. I found my personal strength. Something belonged to me.
Joyce/Ch 5	To me, it is fate that brought me to SBHK, and which changed my life. In my company, I could not always look for justice, trust or passion. I

could not know my own strength if I did not join SBHK.

- Joyce/Ch 5 I understand why people have suicidal thoughts during that period of emptiness. It is lucky that, due to so much experience in SBHK, I understood what was happening to me. Fortunately, I was aware of what a dangerous situation it was. At the same moment, I escaped from the trap. It was like a feeling of being reborn. It was a very strange feeling that I can still remember clearly. It enlightened me to understand why people have suicidal thoughts in adversity. So, I admit that SBHK really helped me to come out from this kind of negative thought.
- Bonnie/Ch 6 It is the exchange of information among volunteers, who come from all walks of life, and listening to stories from different clients that allow me to keep track of the pace of society. During my spare time at the Hotline, I learn a great deal from volunteers who have different professional backgrounds and experience. For instance, I can understand the pressures on a teacher, a lawyer or social worker. I can hear different views on a social problem from various people. Besides, when I talk to clients, I feel the shift of the focus of some social problems. I can feel the change in the values of society, for instance, on lover relationships, parenting style or even the attitude of people towards mental health patients.
- Mr Lau/Ch 7 Learning active listening skills in SBHK many years ago helped me in my full-time job.
- Mr Lau/Ch 7 By responding to the problems posed by clients, I feel the change in the culture of Hong Kong. The progressive change of conversation topics from emotional problems to mental health problems; from career or academic problems of the individual to parenting problems; and from the problem of a husband having a mistress to finding one's other half on the Mainland: all indicate a change in the values of society.
- Mr Lau/Ch 7 Another benefit for me to stay in the service is to keep my brain ticking over. The practice of active listening skills and the provision of empathetic responses to clients demand a quick processing of my mind. I suspect that such service would prevent me from developing dementia!
- Ms Cheung/Ch 9 By learning the experience of the clients, I learn how to care and to understand a person under such difficult situation, and more importantly, I recognize how important it is to avoid positioning myself in such a situation.

#### *7.1.12 Overcome initial difficulties by bonding with other members*

Quite a few members reported having a difficult beginning when they were initially trained and started the service. Because of their inexperience in the service, Han, Joyce and Robert displayed a lack of confidence, at first. It was not until they were able to have regular support from other team members that they became more comfortable in carrying on the service. Tooyoung, Stephen and I had difficult times after serving for many years. Table 13 summarizes the difficult path that volunteers experienced and their views on good group bonding at SBHK:

**Table 13 Summary of initial difficulties of volunteers**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Han/Ch 2	When I reported for duty, I found myself unaccompanied by any other volunteers. There was a feeling of a lack of support. The situation came to a point when I did think of quitting the service. Each time that I reported for duty was difficult for me. I was uneasy with the quiet working environment... I decided to report for duty on Fridays instead of Saturdays. There were more volunteers on Friday evening. With the Friday team, I was able to share freely my feelings after listening to calls. Nothing could be better for me. With the support of team members, I gradually rebuilt my confidence.
Tooyoung/Ch 3	In fact, I did think of leaving several times in the past twenty years. Year after year, I passed my annual appraisal and continued with the service. I have many friends who are either happy or unhappy while I am in between. I am satisfied to have worked as a volunteer in an organization for a quarter of a century. Sometimes I feel I am old and tired, and I wish to find a place to rest.
Joyce/Ch 5	During the first year in the Hotline, I found myself in an awkward position. I did not feel competent to use the skills that I had learned. I had the feeling of being defeated in handling cases. I also found it difficult to use the skills. In other words, my work was not appreciated by other volunteers. My feeling was that of an orphan in my group. I was isolated, like nobody's child. I had no sense of belonging and could not mix socially with others. I was pessimistic. My inferiority nearly drove me to resign.  Interestingly, I discovered that with more exposure to the administration and management work of SBHK, my skill in handling cases also increased.
Robert/Ch 8	However, during the training, I recognized that there was a lack of vocabulary of emotion-related words in my head. It was difficult for me to extract the right words to reflect the feelings of clients... I reflect that I am not the kind of person who is good at sharing or even talking.

I am not used to inviting friends out for a chat or anything like that. Because I had studied computer science, I like to diagnose problems. This sort of diagnostic skill is, in fact, not required by the Hotline service.

Stephen/Ch 10 I resented the change of the grouping method, from the original seven vertical groups named from Monday to Sunday, to a horizontal grouping method of morning, afternoon, evening and overnight, based on the serving time periods. I had enjoyed companionship in the Saturday group, I and my closest volunteers had to split into different groups. However, when I felt the acceptance of the big brothers and sisters in the new group, I felt encouraged to stay with them. The big brothers and sisters reminded me of the nature of this valuable voluntary service and who were the clients to be served. Therefore, I remained in the service.

Vincent/Ch 11 Another dark period was late 2000s, when the 'Samaritans Beyond' project was winding down. It was quite a disappointing moment for me to learn that volunteers were getting too tired for a monthly OND duty, while I had not once stopped doing my monthly OND since 1983. Although I was one of the Exco members, I did not feel that I contributed much to the Exco. Things changed a bit when we started to organize the new the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) and Life Education Center (LEC), as well as when I took up the public relations matters for the Exco. I felt charged with more energy to work with my counterparts.

Bonding of members.

Jason/Ch 1 I remember on one occasion that I responded to an appeal from the management to clean up the centre. I was among a group of volunteers who gathered to renovate the oldest Lo Foo Ngam Center. It was just like family members acting together to clean the house. The sense of family life was unique to SBHK.

Jason/Ch 1 The volunteers formed a very strong bond and were able to support each other. As there were only about 40 to 50 volunteers, we knew each other very well and became very good friends. We reported for duty regularly; we basically grew in understanding each other.

Tooyoung/Ch 3 They are a group of friends, who cannot be found in other places. Together with other members, I developed from a membership relationship to friendship.

Polly/Ch 4 I admit that my stay in the service is highly motivated by the cohesive group bonds of the team I belong to.

Polly/Ch 4 Although the chance for volunteers to meet during the service is not high, we can chat frankly when we do meet. It is difficult to find similar

friendships in other social settings. The volunteers are genuine and authentic friends who serve SBHK wholeheartedly.

- Robert/Ch 8 I joined the Hotline service, for two reasons in particular. The first was the good group bonding of the Thursday group. The group members were good and caring. The group was sufficient for me and I did not need to expand my circle of friends.
- Ms Cheung/Ch 9 I am also thankful for coming to know many friends and fellow workers who joined SBHK to serve the community. We do not do it for money. Neither do we do it for fame or personal reputation. The commitment of the workers around me actually influenced me to be active in the service. I could not imagine anywhere where I could find such a group of friends whom I would meet every week and work together, having a common goal to serve clients. It is so valuable to have this group of people around me.
- Ms Cheung/Ch 9 I recognized that fellow volunteers were mutually supporting each other in the Friday group, to which my husband and I belonged. If one of us left, there might be a breakdown in the bond, with more and more volunteers leaving.
- Stephen/Ch 10 However, when I felt the acceptance of the 'big brothers and sisters' in the new group, I felt encouraged to stay with them. The 'big brothers and sisters' reminded me of the nature of this valuable voluntary service and who were the clients to be served..
- Vincent/ Ch 11 In the old days, SBHK divided members into just seven groups, Monday to Sunday. The bonds of group members were remarkable. Normally, I did not need to bring any snacks to the centre as there were some motherly members who would do so. Members worked together as a team and would divide work on the spot, as necessary.

Group bonding was described as remarkable, treasurable, supportive and authentic, in the old Monday to Sunday group system. Volunteers recognized team members as friends with common goals. Such friendships have even lasted after members left SBHK. It was quite different from what they could experience in their career lives. Their friendship has remained unchanged over the years. Although most members acknowledge the importance of friends in the service, most of them reported that they would not quit the service even if some of their friends left. Ms Cheung even said she would remain in the service in order not to discourage her friends from serving SBHK.

Knapp and Davis Smith (1995) opined that such social support or bonding derived from friendships and network made through volunteering is considered a powerful factor in



the retention of volunteers. It is also supported by Dean and Goodlad (1998). The social support and friendship among volunteers does reinforce such findings.

As volunteers work in a shared place and with a common goal for saving life, their teamwork in manning and training, as well as the environmental setting of SBHK, already provides a good grounding for trust and unconditional friendship among volunteers. In addition to the ordinary sense of friendship in a volunteer organization, experienced volunteers are well trained in practising empathetic responses. The empathy and trust among both junior and experienced volunteers seem comparatively easy to develop.

## **7.2 Analysis of the organizational factors**

While I have explored a number of factors affecting the retention of long-serving volunteers in SBHK, there is also the influence of the organizational structure or factors that they have enjoyed over the years. Being a long-serving volunteer for over thirty years and one of the directors of the SBHK for the past ten years and more, I can relate to a number of points mentioned in the literature on the management or structural components that might foster the retention of volunteers. SBHK did seem to have provided a management structure to support this retention. These are echoed by views of the volunteers. Some of the key components are summarized as follow:

### **7.2.1 SERVER model**

McCudden (2000) provides a SERVER model with six components to highlight the important of organizational structure and policy towards the retention of volunteers:

1. A continuing, professional and flexible supporting structure of training and supervision

SBHK does have an open volunteering policy, written in 義工手冊 (*Volunteer Handbook*, 2014). In general, the different types of volunteer membership and their qualifications and obligations are stated. Over the years, new volunteers have been

trained and evaluated by experienced volunteers. The supervision and evaluation were mainly conducted by volunteers and only administratively supported by professional social workers. There were laid-down criteria or annual service score to be attained by volunteers in order for them to pass their annual appraisal. However, there was flexibility built into the appraisal system to prevent immediate disqualification in the event of an unfortunate fail due to insufficient attendance. Volunteers have a chance to complete a less demanding attendance requirement for a short period to remedy the situation. This flexibility allows volunteers to have time to rectify their attendance over a longer period in their busy lives.

## 2. Expectation - Volunteers understand the nature and extent of the commitment

Volunteers are well aware of their service requirement in terms of annual scores (40), service hours and types of service (義工手冊 *Volunteer Handbook*, 2014). They might apply for leave if they had a good reason, such as being overseas for a certain period or medical grounds.

## 3. Role management – volunteers are encouraged to meet own needs

Apart from being a listener on the Hotline, volunteers are encouraged to increase or diversify their roles progressively in the service. They could be a debriefer, group leader, role-play facilitator in a training class, trainer/lecturer, a volunteer of another centre and even a director (member of the Exco). The constitution of SBHK has laid down open and transparent procedures for the election of Exco members. All ordinary members are eligible to be an Exco member through the biennial election (SBHK M&A, 2012) or by special appointment by the Exco.

Volunteers can choose to take up more roles in the organization, according to their own desire. However, there is no compulsory requirement for them to take on other roles. It is a flexible and voluntary system.

## 4 Formal personal specification and job description, regular open review

The duties of volunteers are laid down in the 義工手冊 (*Volunteer Handbook*, 2014) with a clear indication of their roles and obligations. Although there was no contract to

be signed between volunteers and the SBHK, except the *ab initio* one, the general requirements were applicable to all volunteers. It is for the volunteers to apply for variation to the general requirements with certain application forms and procedure laid down in the *Volunteer Handbook*. The date of the annual appraisal or the period of assessment is made known to each volunteer at the beginning of a new assessment period.

## 5 Regular evaluation and monitoring

For their annual appraisal, apart from their attendance requirement, volunteers are also required to fulfill a competence requirement either by having a line check of a live call by an experienced volunteer or undertaking at least two in-house training sessions during the period of assessment. Again, flexibility has thus been built into the system, as some volunteers might not want to have a line check, and prefer to learn new skills to fulfill the requirements, while others are happier not to put in any extra time on top of their service hours. While the attendance requirement protected the regularity of practice, the competence requirement provided additional quality control to ensure that volunteers could obtain regular feedback or updated counselling skill training.

## 6 Personal and professional relationship found on openness, understanding and genuineness.

The executive committee of SBHK is transparent. The chairman of the group leaders' meeting is the designated observer at the Exco meeting. Exco member representatives and the executive director (staff) of SBHK also attend each group leaders' meeting to facilitate the exchange of information between working level staff and senior management. Both Exco meetings and group leaders' meetings have formal terms of reference. The constitutions of SBHK also specify the terms and conditions of the highest authority of the SBHK, namely the annual general meeting (SBHK M&A, 2012). The voting rights of members at the general meeting are addressed in the constitution, as well.

Every member has the right to be elected as director. The election process is addressed in the constitution. As mentioned by some interviewees, there are no

conflicts of interest among volunteers, in general. They work together and make friends with each other. They have a common goal and interest to serve clients. SBHK is a place where they can find genuine friends and that is why their friendships last for so many years, even if some of them leave the organization.

Table 14 below summarizes the flexibility that volunteers have enjoyed over their years of service.

**Table 14 Summary in agreement with the SERVER Model**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Jason/Ch 1	There were not many rules for volunteers to follow. Volunteers often needed to exercise their own judgement.
Jason/Ch 1	My impression was that I did not need to spend much time there, and I didn't have much spare time. It was about one hour a week but it was flexible about when that hour could be.
Han/Ch 2	Unlike other group leaders, I did not want to become an Exco member. Instead, I became more active in volunteer training. I like to help out in various training courses for new volunteers.
Han/Ch 2	With the increased daytime workload and the burden of studying, I was exhausted and could not retain my high level of attendance at the Hotline service. Nevertheless, I passed my annual appraisal with minimum attendance. It was a tough period.
Tooyoung/Ch 3	I was encouraged by other members to stay and just to carry out the basic work of a volunteer, which is listening to calls - an adequate goal.
Polly/Ch 4	SBHK allows volunteers to commit to a reduced service frequency for the coming six months. This gives them some leeway in organizing their spare time and then to return to their normal requirement as before. Failing to fulfil this reduced frequency in the next half year would lead to the downgrading of worker membership to trainee membership.
Polly/Ch 4	If I could share more experiences with new members and if they could benefit from them, there would be more trained workers to listen to calls and so more clients would be benefited. That is why I am making available more time to assist in training especially on case supervision and in leading recruits for role-play activities.
Joyce/Ch 5	The management post provided me with a new chance to reflect on my listening skills. I was able to improve my listening skills. I gradually found that I could handle clients in a better way. I had my new insight into how I could be empathetic with clients.... The management and administrative works were more suitable for me than purely applied

active listening skills.

- Joyce/Ch 5      Without coming into conflict with the helping principles of SBHK of not actively using religion as a tool, I added to my personal insight in handling clients. I might apply several concepts such as 'living here and now' and 'everything comes from your heart', which are in fact 'how you look at the world (things or people), and how such a world affects your thoughts and emotions'.
- Joyce/Ch 5      SBHK has allowed me to try new things continually. I would feel that I was just an ordinary person if I had not joined the service.
- Joyce/Ch 5      I know that if I had not carried out non-case related work, I would not have stayed so long at SBHK,
- Bonnie/Ch 6      ...was attracted by the recruitment advertisement about the flexible hours of service.
- Mr Lau/Ch 7      With all my tight scheduling, I could still maintain my basic service in SBHK. Nevertheless, occasionally I needed to apply for a reduced service commitment to maintain my membership.
- Mr Lau/Ch 7      In the unlikely event that SBHK no longer provides the Hotline service, I still would like to serve as a volunteer with the life ambassador programme in our Life Education Centre (LEC) or as a crisis assistant in our Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC).
- Robert/Ch 8      I thought that my role in contributing to suicide prevention work in Hong Kong in the form of management to be more suitable, and confessed that I was more skilled in the field of management than Hotline duty.
- Vincent/Ch 11      Instead of asking the Exco to change the policy to deploy more staffing for OND, I took the initiative to form a group of special volunteers who could take more ONDs. As it was approaching year 2000, I named the group 'The Samaritans Beyond'.
- Vincent/Ch 11      From a short-term frontline telephone service, my focus expanded to cover the medium-term crisis intervention face-to-face service; from a para-counselling service, our coverage extended to life education at school and in the community; from volunteer training we shifted to provide professional counselling training; and from community service, we looked at the global tendency and large, territory-wide campaigns. There were more opportunities and challenges for me, as an amateur, to discuss suicide prevention issues with government officials, professionals, academics and the mass media.

### *7.2.2 An organization to be proud of*

In addition to the SERVER model, McCudden (2000) stated that volunteers need to feel proud of the organization at local or international level. The feeling of serving a successful enterprise and achievement against a feeling of being rejected or with deteriorating standards or commitment is important. As SBHK has been established for over 55 years, and it was Asia's first organization of this nature, its expansion from one Hotline Centre to having a Crisis Intervention Centre and a Life Education Centre in the past decade makes it the largest suicide prevention agency in Hong Kong. In fact, it might be one of largest suicide prevention NGOs in the world. The grant of subvention service to the Crisis Intervention Centre in 2003 highlighted the recognition by HKSAR government, as no new subvention had been granted by the government for some years before or after the subvention of this Centre. The volunteers are generally proud of their membership, despite not being allowed to make use of their status for private or business promotion. The hardship undergone to obtain the initial qualification after the year-long *ab initio* training and to maintain their membership through the annual appraisal system gives them a sense of pride.

### 7.2.3 *Flexibility and autonomy*

Russell and Scott (1997) addressed the importance of flexibility in a volunteering organization. Such flexibility, in terms of the appraisal system and attendance record, had been discussed before. In fact, there was also flexibility over the time to report on duty. Volunteers can choose their exact hours of service through a computer server. They can amend their roster easily through password-protected computer network. See Table 14 above for volunteers' quotes on flexibility at SBHK.

In respect of the service provided, from the stories of the volunteers we can see that individual volunteers might apply special skills to handle clients, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Mr Lau), the Person-centered Therapy approach (Stephen) or a Buddhism-informed approach (Joyce) or living in the present moment (Han and Bonnie). Volunteers are quite free to apply the skills that they have learned to communicate with clients. However, the bottom line is that they need to be empathic with clients, not to criticize or judge them, nor be encouraged to give their personal opinion or propose any religion to clients.

Exco is basically run by volunteers, that is to say, the management styles or management direction is governed by the volunteers. They are basically volunteers of the organization who are elected biennially. Volunteers at SBHK actually drive and govern the development of the organization, and enjoy their right to change their role in the service, but are not under any pressure to do so. They enjoy a high degree of autonomy and flexibility in the roles that they play and the service that they provide.

#### *7.2.4 Convenient location*

Gidron (1983) highlighted the importance of having a convenient location for the service, so volunteers could be retained. Having experienced a major turnover of volunteers at the Shun Lee Centre, the management of SBHK maintains the Hotline service in Choi Hung Estate. Unlike the previous centre, the Shun Lee Centre, Choi Hung Centre is served by a convenient mass transportation system (MTR). Moreover, the walk from the MTR station is safe for volunteers, especially the women, late at night and in the early hours, as they need to undertake overnight duty. In fact, the Exco should like to co-locate the Hotline centre with the Crisis Intervention Centre and the LEC to facilitate the development and integration of staff and volunteers from the different centres. However, given the location of the latter centres at Pat Tin, which is not as conveniently served by MTR, they prefer to maintain the Hotline at Choi Hung to ensure its stability.

**Table 15 Summary of quotes on the location of the centres**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Jason/Ch 1	(The location) was quite convenient for me. It was on the route between my home and my workplace. I could be a part of the service by taking a bus from my work place.
Robert/Ch 8	I only served for six months. It was because I found it too tiring to travel two hours from Hong Kong University on Hong Kong Island to the Hotline centre in Shun Lee Estate in Kowloon.
Vincent/Ch 11	The Shun Lee centre had a Hotline working room and a conference room. It was more spacious than the Lok Fu centre. Although the environment at Shun Lee was better than before, it was not a convenient location for the volunteers. It was not located on the Mass Transit Railway (MTR). The majority of volunteers needed to take an extra bus or minibus trip from the nearby MTR station. As a result, the travelling time to and from the centre was longer. The centre made no positive contribution in terms of maintaining a stable volunteer workforce. The turnover rate for volunteers was high.

#### *7.2.5 Monetary allowance*

The volunteers of SBHK receive a transport allowance for each duty day that they work. Although the amount of the allowance in general cannot support the round trip on the MTR, the allowance provides a gesture of appreciation for their service. In fact, some volunteers choose to donate the amount back to the organization, knowing that the organization is always in need of funding for its development.

#### *7.2.6 Feel being needed*

Every year, SBHK publishes the suicide statistics of Hong Kong in its annual report and gives the trend analysis at a press conference. This allows the public to be continuously informed of the service that they provide and at the same time inform the public of the importance of keeping in good mental health. Besides, the daily news of suicides in the newspapers are displayed as cuttings at the Hotline Centre for volunteers to see. This allows them to understand their importance in providing this suicide prevention service. As they know that there is only a limited service covering this area, every call that they take is important in reducing the chance of suicide.



### 7.3 Analysis in terms of practical and theoretical wisdom

The Greek philosopher Aristotle suggested that a human being can become a good person (*praxis*) or achieve a higher level of being (become a wise person) through the regular or habitual practise of virtue as a means (*poiesis*). Many of the practices of the volunteers demonstrated these virtues *per se*. It appears that most of them were virtuous, for no declared reason. This is what Aristotle described as *praxis*: people act for the intrinsic good that they feel when doing so. However, Joyce, Stephen and I also potentially covered what Aristotle described as *poiesis* when we felt personal enlightenment at some stage of our lives, while our personal philosophy was mostly connected with the experience in SBHK (see item 7.3.2 below).

#### 7.3.1 Practical wisdom (*phronesis*)

The virtues that volunteers were practising were in their attitudes to helping other people, perseverance or resilience, gratitude, authenticity and integrity, curiosity, open mindedness and creativity, self-sufficiency and compassion.

##### *Attitude to helping*

The intention to help other people is already a kind of virtue, by its nature. Most volunteers expressed their intention or attitude to help others, whether by following their own will (Jason, Bonnie, Mr Lau) or according to their religion (Tooyoung, Polly, Robert, Ms Cheung and Stephen). The helping attitude of volunteers can be seen generally from the statements in Table 16:

**Table 16 Summary of attitudes to helping others**

Source	Quote
Jason/Ch 1	By the nature of the service, we had a common goal to serve people in need. We could share our personal lives and support others.
Han/Ch 2	I derive satisfaction from the process of helping others, perhaps especially in clarifying messy situations.
Tooyoung/Ch 3	However, there is a strong tendency for anyone who talks with friends to give personal opinions or advice. SBHK does not recommend giving advice or being too focused on problem solving. I found that I need to do much extra work to override this personal tendency. Because of my commitment to serving people in need, I have let go of my own talking

style and have learned to use these particular listening skills accordingly. This is my commitment to serve in SBHK, when I agree with the core belief of the organization. I have to adopt the approach recommended by the organization in order to conduct my role properly.

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Tooyoung/Ch 3  | I believe that it is a Christian's duty to help others. I have adopted this value without question. Becoming one of the Samaritan Befrienders, I can help others regularly. I believe that Jesus Christ should receive a good impression of me!   |
| Tooyoung/Ch 3  | I think that the philosophy of SBHK matches my own which is to serve people in need. This is one of the most important reasons that keeps me at SBHK, as well as its true value and, why it has been going for so long.   |
| Robert/Ch 8    | This means that I could talk to the clients using all the listening skills that I had acquired, but that listening patiently to others is not my character. My inner self is different from my performing self. My listening is a form of role-play. By doing so, I could satisfy the requirements by helping people to become independent. |
| Ms Cheung/Ch 9 | If one of us left, there might be a breakdown in the bond, with more and more volunteers leaving. Perhaps, this sort of mutual bonding was tacitly affecting each team member to maintain the full force of the team.   |
| Ms Cheung/Ch 9 | To respond to the question of what kept me in SBHK for so long, I think of a Chinese quote: 'Helping people is the source of happiness'. In fact, I have had a good deal of insight into life through serving on the Hotline.   |

Mr Lau mentioned his ability to survive environmental hardship. This reflected his resilience in life. Other volunteers expressed that there were periods during their service when they were in such a low state that they would have quit the service, if they had not been felt the urge to persevere. Such low moods primarily originated in their lack of confidence in handling cases during their early stages of service. Han overcame the difficulty by changing groups to obtain more support from other volunteers. Volunteers such as Joyce and Robert recovered their confidence by taking on management roles in SBHK. Polly and Stephen recovered through accumulating greater experience with clients. Ms Cheung overcame it by finding a meaning for remaining in the service (logotherapy). I reenergized myself by taking on an extra management role. See Table 17 for quotes on resilience and perseverance:

**Table 17 Summary of quotes on the virtues of resilience and perseverance**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Mr Lau/Ch 7	I could tolerate eating very cheap meals. Earning money is not easy. It is a slow process to endure a hard life. I have tried manual labour, such as assembling plastic flowers and watches before.
Han/Ch 2	When I reported for duty, I found myself unaccompanied by any other volunteers. There was a feeling of a lack of support. The situation came to a point when I did think of quitting the service.... I decided to report for duty on Fridays instead of Saturdays. There were more volunteers on Friday evenings. With the Friday team, I was able to share my feelings freely after listening to calls. Nothing could be better for me. With the support of team members, I gradually rebuilt my confidence.
Joyce/Ch 5	<p>My work was not appreciated by other volunteers. My feeling was that of an orphan in my group. I was isolated, like nobody's child. I had no sense of belonging and could not mix socially with others. I was pessimistic. My inferiority nearly drove me to resign. ... Mr Yim, asked me to be the secretary of the group leaders' meeting. I accepted the task, not knowing how it would affect my whole life.</p> <p>Interestingly, I discovered that, with more exposure to the administration and management work of SBHK, my skill in handling cases also increased.</p>
Robert/Ch 8	I thought that my role in contributing to suicide prevention work in Hong Kong in the form of management to be more suitable, and confessed that I was more skilled in the field of management than Hotline duty. It was one of my strengths to diagnose a problem and implement measures to handle the problem.
Polly/Ch 4	At the beginning of my service, I had a great many worries about how I performed in the conversation and what I could provide to the clients. However, with more and more experience of handling calls, I learned a great deal about myself: my style of learning, my learning capacity, my performance and my limitations.
Stephen/Ch 10	I found the suicide Hotline service challenging and was worried about whether I could pass the final screening. However, after I had more experience in handling clients with a higher suicide risk without any detrimental effect on them, my confidence came back and I considered myself competent for the service.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I was frustrated by them and wanted to leave the service. My resilience was really tested for a period of more than two years.... If I quit, it would leave my husband alone to deal with the issues and I

might not be able to provide the same kind of support and sharing between us. Another consideration for me was my worry about the 'falling stone' effect if I left SBHK.

Vincent/Ch 11 Another dark period was late 2000s, when the 'Samaritans Beyond' project was winding down. It was quite a disappointing moment for me to learn that volunteers were getting too tired for a monthly OND duty, while I had not once stopped doing my monthly OND since 1983. Although I was one of the Exco members, I did not feel that I contributed much to the Exco. Things changed a bit when we started to organize the new the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) and Life Education Center (LEC), as well as when I took up the public relations matters for the Exco. I felt charged with more energy to work with my counterparts.

### *Gratitude*

Polly appreciated the efforts of other volunteers who took on overnight duties regularly, and Joyce went out with her camera to take photographs of nature. She admired the natural beauty of the world. Table 18 shows how they expressed their virtue of gratitude.

**Table 18 Summary of quotes on the virtue of gratitude**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Polly/Ch 4	I appreciate very much the volunteers on OND. It is not easy to take overnight calls, as it disrupts regular sleep pattern.
Joyce/Ch 5	I brought a camera and started to hike or drive to country parks alone to see the sunrise or the sunset on holidays or after work. It is form of natural healing, exactly as I recommend to my clients before: death is just a part of the natural cycle and I love the colourful clouds at dawn or after the sunset. I am totally absorbed by nature when I start to take pictures.

### *Authenticity and integrity*

Tooyoung believed that a person has to take responsibility to fulfil his/her commitment. Once she promised to do so, she would carry out a task with commitment. Polly admired the authenticity of the friendships between volunteers. Joyce internalized the Buddhism concept as her own way of life and used her authentic self to communicate with clients. Similarly, Ms Cheung internalized the skill of active

listening as a part of herself. She became genuine in her communication with clients.

Table 19 shows how they expressed their virtue of authenticity and integrity:

**Table 19 Summary of quotes on the virtues of authenticity and integrity**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Tooyoung/Ch 3	I also notice that I have a deal of passion in talking about commitment. It is not just a commitment to serve as a volunteer. It is also a commitment to help other people and to take up on one's responsibilities. Commitment means a great deal to me.
Polly/Ch 4	The volunteers are genuine and authentic friends who serve SBHK wholeheartedly.
Joyce/Ch 5	With my strong personal belief in Buddhism, I now find more satisfaction in the frontline service. I attribute this again to how I feel inwardly. I am applying myself, rather than principles. I have become more flexible in various ways. I could apply the concept more in my daily life and see things from another person's angle. While I avoid lingering on things in the past, now I acknowledge my awareness of those things. I admit that I am still searching for direction. I need more time to understand the holistic concept.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I had internalized the concept of active listening in my life in order to exercise them properly. In other words, a person needs to be genuine in communication

### *Curiosity, open mindedness and creativity*

Joyce's curiosity allowed her to open herself to learn new things. This triggered her to join SBHK. Bonnie, also, was curious to learn about what was happening in society and the environment which might be affecting the lives of citizens. Mr Lau was a father with a very open mind, and he considered himself liberal but cautious in parenting. I was sensitive to tragic suicide news and had the creativity or open mind to set up a press conference to try to appeal to the public not to commit suicide. Table 20 shows how volunteers expressed their virtue of curiosity open-mindedness and creativity:

**Table 20 Summary of quotes on the virtues of curiosity, open-mindedness and creativity**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Joyce/Ch 5	My character always allows me to try new things. I once learned geomancy. However, as soon as I completed the learning, I never took it up again. I also learned fortune telling. However, I discovered that there

were some areas which were not covered. I left it aside. The same pattern applies to many other things that I learn. After I understand it, I do not bother about it anymore and forget it. Maybe it is the same exploratory attitude that drove me to join SBHK. It could be my fate that I learn the skills and then leave. From a Buddhist angle, it is fate. There is something there and that's why I follow it. It happens repeatedly, in my learning of rock climbing, canoeing and rowing as well. Once I get the certificate, I do not play the sport anymore.

- Bonnie/Ch 6 It is my curiosity to learn about things in society that has led me to my current career and voluntary service in SBHK. Unlike other ladies, who I know like cooking or shopping, I care about the environment, public policy and utilities that affect the lives of citizens. It interests me to learn more about society and I am eager to listen to my friends and
- Mr Lau/Ch 7 Provided it does not deviate from the norm, as everyone in the family can do the things that they like. Nevertheless, I occasionally have reservations about my style, as I question whether I have offered sufficient care to my children. It seems to be a liberal but cautious approach.
- Vincent/Ch 11 I remember an occasion in the 2000s when two suicide pacts occurred within a week. It seemed to be some kind of copycat effect when a pair of lovers committed suicide just a few days after a married couple committed suicide. I told myself and the centre-in-charge that, if a third case occurred shortly, we needed to set up a press conference to make an urgent public appeal to try to stop the trend. Unfortunately, a third case did happen, just the following week.

### *Self sufficiency*

Both Joyce and Bonnie claimed that they were satisfied with their present status. They found their simple lives sufficient for their well-being, as quoted in Table 21.

**Table 21 Summary of quotes on the virtue of being self-sufficient**

Source	Quote
Joyce/Ch 5	It is the position that I chose. I would not seek promotion or remain at a junior level. I am in a lower middle position; in which I feel most comfortable. A minimal lifestyle is sufficient for me.
Bonnie/Ch 6	I am not an unfortunate person, compared with others. I felt satisfied with my status when I was young.

### *Being compassionate*

Bonnie felt merciful for orphans and she treated the girl she supported as her own daughter, and Stephen especially felt the importance of accompanying people who are in adversity and wished to comfort others by showing his understanding of their needs. See Table 22 for how they spoke about their compassionate hearts:

**Table 22 Summary of quotes on the virtue of being compassionate**

Source	Quote
Bonnie/Ch 6	I only know that her parents abandoned her due to the shortcomings in her intelligence. Notwithstanding this, I often took her for outings. I treated her as my daughter and played with her.
Stephen/Ch 10	My company with people suffering from these problematic issues was a way to allow clients to feel someone was trying to understand their needs.

The above examples of the conduct of volunteers indicate that their attitudes or habits can be compared to Aristotle's notion of virtue and being virtuous through *praxis*. However, there were also indications of *poiesis* (see section 7.3.2 below).

### 7.3.2 Peak/transcendent experience as a landmark experience

Maslow studied peak experience throughout his whole academic life. He understood peak experience as follows

*"It is true that human beings strive perpetually towards ultimate humanness, which itself may be, anyway, a different kind of Becoming and growing. It's as if we were doomed forever to try to arrive at a state to which we could never attain. Fortunately, we now know this not to be true, or at least it is not the only truth. There is another truth that integrates with it. We are again and again rewarded for good, becoming by transient states of absolute Being, by peak experiences. Achieving basic-need gratification gives as many peak experiences, each of which are absolute delights, perfect in themselves and needing no more than themselves to validate life. This is like rejecting the notion that a Heaven lies some place beyond the end of the path of life. Heaven, so to speak, lies waiting for us through life, ready to step into for a time and to enjoy before we come back to our ordinary life of striving. And once we have been in it, we can remember it forever and feed ourselves on this memory, and be sustained in time of stress"* (Maslow, 1968: 169-170)

In fact, Maslow's above statement matches Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, where some people are able to become a wise person (by the process of carrying out virtues) and achieve a kind of supreme happiness (Engberg-Pedersen, 1983; Cooper, 2012). Besides,

Pyrrho added that ‘the wise man ought to repose in... a state of freedom from disturbance’. The wise man has true insight into the human condition and, by acting in accordance with that insight, is able to achieve its tranquillity.

Stephen discovered that his core source of internal peacefulness came from helping others to overcome difficulties and to grow. This statement can be interpreted as his enjoying the tranquillity after practising the virtue of helping others (Curnow, 2010: 104). This is, according to Pyrrho, what a wise man could experience. Since Stephen was a person who liked to reflect on his experience, he might have better potential to attain the wisdom of what Confucius referred to being attained by reflection, imitation or bitter experience (suffering) (Confucius in Hinett, 2002, v). In a way, I imagine that Stephen was progressing well in attaining *eudaimonia*.

Joyce once had a feeling of being re-born and enlightened with an in-depth understanding of why people have suicidal thought. It reflected how she understood the nature of suffering as Epicurus did (Inwood and Gerson, 1997: 442–3, in Curnow, 2010: 100). In fact, she had two other experiences of feeling extraordinary joy and happiness when she dissolved herself in the natural scene. The experience resembled what James mentioned about Saint Teresa’s mystical experience, when she found herself totally dissolved in God with nothing of her that she could feel (James, 1901) and the ‘flow’ experience mentioned by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), when a person dissolves into a working environment to become timeless and selfless. However, her description of the level of joy or tranquility resembled the testimony of peak experience mentioned by Maslow. Nonetheless, with her Buddhism knowledge at a later stage, she described them as a state of mindfulness and selflessness.

I mentioned my peak experience in Chapter 11 of the book. The experience reflected all the vital elements of *eudaimonia*, such as an extraordinary sense of happiness. My recognition of the importance of selflessness thereafter, as supported by Pyrrho in Diogenes Laertius (IX.68), is the need for detachment from the belief of how things are (Curnow, 2010: 104):



**Table 23 Summary of quotes on peak experience**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Joyce/Ch 5	At the same moment, I escaped from the trap. It was like a feeling of being re-born. It was a very strange feeling that I can still remember clearly. It enlightened me to understand why people have suicidal thoughts in adversity. So I admit that SBHK really helped me to come out from this kind of negative thought.
Joyce/Ch 5	I suddenly heard clearly the sound of two birds singing happily on a branch of a big tree in front of the balcony. At that particular moment, the golden sun ray shone a spotlight at the birds. With the light wind stirring the leaves gently, a beautiful, golden picture appeared before me. At that moment, I found myself dissolving into the picture. A strong feeling of tranquillity and happiness fell on me. It was a feeling of happiness, and life was so wonderful.
Joyce/Ch 5	When I had a rest halfway up, I turned my head and saw the whole Shek Pik Reservoir under the clear blue sky. I suddenly felt that I was reduced to a minute speck in the centre of a g swirl. In a split second, I totally dissolved into the mother of nature inside the scene with trees around, sea, and reservoir below, and blue sky above interwoven harmony with each other. At the very moment, I had a feeling of how small a human was. It was small like a speck. Nothing and no one in the world was significant. Happiness or sorrows were just like clouds that came and were gone without an eternity in nature.
Joyce/Ch 5	In fact, I had a similar experience after I advanced my knowledge in Buddhism. On an occasion when I was practising the Amitabuddha mantra with a group of Buddhists, I closed my eyes on reciting the mantra and, at that particular moment, I found myself dressed like a lama sitting on a snowy mountain practising the mantra. I could see each word of the mantra come out like an unbroken chain in Tibetan calligraphy from my mouth and fly up to the sky. There was again no sensation of either happiness or sadness. I was dissolved into the white snow and linked with everything in the world, in peace and tranquility.
Joyce/Ch 5	With more Buddhism knowledge that I have acquired in recent years, I would describe that I was in a state of mindfulness, a stage of selflessness and extreme joy when the experience came.
Stephen/Ch 10	I discovered that my core source of internal peacefulness comes from helping other people to overcome difficulties and growth.
Vincent/Ch 11	and I understood that my sadness actually came from my desire to maintain that attachment, despite the unwillingness of the other party. It had a selfish origin in me. Then I tried to think in a way to be rid of my selfish thoughts. At that moment, miraculously, something happened. I had a feeling of shifting my thought from my brain to my heart, and

what was richly filling my heart was an outburst of a sense of selflessness. It was like an explosion in my heart, but with indescribable joy. It was a joyful feeling that I had never experienced before.

Vincent/Ch 11 My experience on the bus was the moment when I suddenly, successfully, only for a moment hit the right frequency and I felt at once alignment with the world. Although the moment was short, it presented the greatest moment of human joy, happiness with glimpse of wisdom.

Vincent/Ch 11 I remembered that I had a feeling like my heart was blossoming with beautiful flowers a few days after, when I awoke at 5 am. The ancient Egyptians and Eastern religions had the metaphor of the lotus flower, the beauty that emerged from the mud, the symbol of primordial beginnings in base matter. Although the feeling did not last long the pattern of thoughts remained thereafter. Suddenly, I seemed to have many thoughts in my mind that I was confident about but I was still puzzling on the nature of that, what I could only call, a miraculous moment.

The experiences of the three volunteers provide a potential link between selfless service and virtue to attain ultimate human wisdom. According to Maslow, if they are not mountain peak experiences, at least they are foothill experiences, little glimpses of absolute, self-validated delight; little moments of Being. Being and Becoming are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. Approach and arrival are both in themselves rewarding (Maslow, 1968).

Pearce (2002) mentioned that, prior to the phenomenon of his 'unconflicted behaviour', (peak experience, I suppose), he was suffering from the loss of his wife a year earlier. Her sudden death caused him to experience a kind of pseudo-suicidal recklessness. It meant that he did not care for anything, even something that would rationally lead to his own death. The push for the reckless abandon to extremes led to a breakthrough in knowing that took place within him, with no transition or preparation. He suddenly knew how to ignore his instincts of self-preservation. It enriched him with a temporary absence of all fear and the giving up of all caution. This allowed him to achieve something which would have been considered impossible under ordinary circumstances. He identified that he had deep emotional suffering, prior to his awakening.

Both James (1901) and Gurdjieff (Speeth, 1989) referred to the selflessness state as a stage of self-consciousness that occurs spontaneously for a short time that often leaves particularly rich memories behind. *“These are the special moments such as being in situations of great danger, intense emotion or extraordinary stress that it may occur. Then, attention is clear, impartial and relatively complete, and is divided between self and environment so that people react spontaneously, appropriately and sometimes heroically”* (Speeth, 1989: 58).

It is not easy for a person to have a peak experience. According to the literature, it cannot be planned or guaranteed by any short-term preparation work. It could be argued that, out of a group of eleven volunteers serving in the same non-religious organization, having two volunteers who solidly reported such experiences and one volunteer who had a peripheral experience of the phenomenon is itself rare. Perhaps, there is something about this kind of work or about this particular organization and context that has fostered openness to such experiences. Based on my personal experience and understanding, and my readings of Maslow on peak experience and of the ancient philosophers on practical and theoretical wisdom, I think that the practice of selflessness, in particular the regular exercise of empathy with the Hotline, plays a key role in contributing to the result. See more on selflessness in 7.3.4 below.

### 7.3.3 *Overcoming suffering is a common way to attain theoretical wisdom (sophia)*

The enlightenment experience that Joyce and I experienced came after acute emotional or mental suffering. Joyce was suffering from emptiness, sadness and guilt. I was depressed at not being trusted, and felt sad and guilty for developing this irretrievable situation. Table 24 details how we talked of this pain:

**Table 24 Summary of quotes on overcoming suffering**

Source	Quote
Joyce/Ch 5	My mother was always on the waiting list to go to a home for the elderly. When she was admitted in 2002, my father volunteered to go as well. It was a quite sudden shock that both my parents went to the home for the elderly. After settling them there, I went for a vacation to Japan. When I returned home, the house was empty. There were no parents or domestic helper. The emptiness at home enlightened and helped me to understand why people wish to commit suicide. However,

I knew that I should not think in that direction.

Vincent/Ch 11 In fact, there was not only a sadness of loss. There was also a guilty feeling: the self-blame of what I had done to contribute to such a sad and irretrievable consequence. Strong feelings of remorse attacked me at unexpected times, throwing me off balance. I kept asking myself how this could have happened when I was supposed to be experienced in handling emotional conflicts in myself and others. All that held me together – my thoughts, my self-confidence, my life philosophy, my way of being with people and my whole value system – were profoundly shaken. I could not fruitfully communicate with the party concerned and there was nothing I could do to rectify the situation. It was painful. Although it was well known in my inner circle of friends and my family, and it was even once reported in a newspaper featuring me that I was a very sentimental person who cried easily, the situation during that period was so distressing that I cried without tears. Only once did I shed tears. I knew that this behaviour was a symptom of depression.

During those months which I describe as the lowest point of my life, I kept thinking about the words of Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, and asked myself one question: 'Is there a reason for my suffering?' The answer did not come for three months.

However, such pain was eventually overcome by questioning and reflecting on the meaning of the experience and the meaning of life. This resonates with Confucius' words:

*"By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."* (Confucius, in Hinett, 2002: v)

I think that suffering is what Confucius referred to as 'experience, which is the bitterest', and is one of the three methods of learning wisdom or meaning of life.

Frankl (1963) said that traumatic suffering is not a prerequisite for finding meaning in our lives. Pattakos (2010) interpreted this as meaning that whenever we suffer we have the ability to find meaning in the situation no matter how severe our suffering is. (Choosing to do is the path to a meaningful life).

Maslow (1968) stated that most learning experience reported by his subjects (those people who had had a peak experience) were very frequently single life experiences, such as tragedies, deaths, traumata, conversations and sudden insights, which forced a change in the life outlook of the person and consequently in everything that they did.

When people look for meaningful fulfilment during the hardest and most painful times, they touch their inner selves nakedly. This pain and hurt initially attacks notions of 'self', but this is often the self as ego. Efforts to deny the pain and hurt, in effect, reconfirm the existence of such pain and hurt, thus create an inner battle for survival. Unfortunately, most people in pain cannot rescue themselves and continue to spiral down the road to depression and other mental health issues. For some, the battle is not lost or won, but is contextualized differently. One detaches the 'self' from the body (or mind) or, as Bruno Bettelheim did during his period in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, detaches oneself from an adult's attitude and adopts a childlike attitude (Bettelheim, 1986). Since the 'self' no longer exists, there is no 'self' to be attacked, thus no more inner battle or suffering. When this selflessness is sufficiently practised and becomes robust, self-transcendence arrives as well. This is why Maslow (1968) commented that it is ironic, for human beings to need to be selfless and to be able to escape from their protective 'humanness' nature for them to find human potential.

In fact, some time earlier, Gurdjieff had already advocated the need for suffering as the second of his three lines of works at the 'school' for attaining peak experience (Speeth, 1989). Self-consciousness occurs spontaneously for a brief moment that often leaves particularly solid memories behind. These are the high moments that may occur in situations of great danger, intense emotion or extraordinary stress.

According to Curnow, 'in philosophical terms, a wise man knows that pain is physical whereas suffering is mental. When properly understood, suffering can be eliminated. And only knowledge that leads to the elimination of suffering has any value' (Inwood and Gerson, 1997: 442-423, in Curnow, 2010: 100).

#### *7.3.4 The importance of selflessness*

When Pearce (2002) suddenly knew how to bypass the most ancient instincts of self-preservation, and rendered his temporary absence of all fear and subsequent abandonment of all caution, he discovered his unknown potential. This echoed what Maslow (1968) mentioned about humans' need to step out from humanness in order to find human potential: This is very similar to what Frankl said:

*“Only as man withdraws from himself in the sense of releasing self-centred interest and attention will he gain an authentic mode of existence”.*

(Frankl, 1960: 99)

Maslow recognized that the moment of complete selflessness was the most significant status to attain during the mysterious moment. It was the ability to purify one's thoughts and the whole being into a selfless state that allowed an alignment with other eternal qualities of being such as love, generosity, creativity and wisdom. Selflessness was the foundation of wisdom and a key to the universe. It seemed to have its place in Kensho or Satori in terms of Zen Buddhism or Nirvana. According to Maslow, 'Nirvana' is a Buddhist word whose original meaning refers to the extinction or blowing out of a lamp or flame. It is the highest form of consciousness, a transcendent state of freedom resulting from the extinction of desire and the blowing out of illusions, in particular, the illusion of an individual self or ego (Maslow, 1968: 170).

Maslow (1968) also stated, for cognition to be complete, it must be detached, disinterested, desireless and unmotivated. Only in this state of mind humans perceive the object in its own nature with its own objective and intrinsic characteristic instead of interpreting the objects according to one's own thoughts on its usefulness or safety risk or applications (Maslow, 1968: 203).

Maxwell (2007), a famous philosopher, emphasized an important status of a person, which is to be able understand what is 'me' and 'not-me', and to 'relax the muscles of our identity' in order to achieve a wisdom-inquiry. These concepts are very similar to the concept of selflessness, where a person needs to ignore what a person originally has and to release their subjectivity in order to have an open mind to receive anything that is happening in the world. Rooted in a similar term, Husserl, the founder of the study of phenomenology, also stated that to achieve a transcendental reduction, a stage of epoché had to be gone through and at this stage, the researcher needs to be pre-suppositionless in order to acquire new knowledge and attain wisdom (Moustakas, 1994). In fact, pre-suppositionless means that researchers need to abandon their past knowledge and experience in order to keep an open mind to feel what is going on in front of them. This echoes what Maslow mentioned above, that one must be detached,

disinterested, desireless and unmotivated in order to perceive an object's true nature. Otherwise, people easily fall into a mental trap of interpreting objects according to their own thoughts. Very often, so-called 'own thoughts' are bundled with defensive or self-protecting desires that block people from perceiving the object objectively. Therefore, selflessness is a key component in acquiring knowledge and wisdom.

The general attitude of Samaritan volunteers to helping other people is already selfless behaviour. When they report for duty, they sacrifice their time and mental energy to helping people in emotional distress. However, sometimes the situation demands even more selflessness, and also the involvement of others to make this sacrifice possible. Others then make a sacrifice for your own sacrifice. For instance, Jason sacrificed his family gathering during Chinese New Eve and lent money to a client against the rules of SBHK. Through his experience with clients, he learned to listen with his head and his heart at the same time to gain a thorough understanding of others (Bettelheim, 1986). Like Maxwell, he 'relaxed his muscle of identity'. Polly did not mind the nuisance caused by manipulative clients. Instead, she looked for growth in them. Joyce devoted her sleeping time to helping clients at odd hours. Mr Lau was most willing to share his experience with fellow workers and even extended his listening to his office, where he maintains the principle of confidentiality when anyone wishes to talk to him.

Ms Cheung maintained her service even during hard times, trying not to affect the team spirit of the group that she belonged to. This was certainly selfless behaviour. Stephen found his core source of happiness in helping others. It meant that he had internalized his helping attitude as a part of him. As helping others is itself selfless behaviour, as I defined earlier, his source of happiness came from selfless behaviour. I organized the Samaritan Beyond project to help more clients at odd hours of the night, which involved sacrifices by my family members and my normal bedtime.

Table 25 indicates the occasions that volunteers exercised a selfless attitude in carrying out their Hotline service, and my special experience and insight on selflessness:

**Table 25 Summary of quotes indicating selfless behaviour**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
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Jason/Ch 1	One Chinese New Year's Eve some twenty years ago, a policeman brought to SBHK a suicidal client who was suffering from homesickness. By 4 am, I finished the case work, but I had to call off my tradition of visiting the Chinese New Year floral market with my family, as the market had already closed and had been taken down! It was fortunate that I had the understanding of my family members about skipping this annual activity.
Jason/Ch 1	I lent \$20 to a client to buy food. Although there was no rule at SBHK to regulate this practice in the early stages, such action was viewed with disquiet by other volunteers and Uncle Chao, who was the watchman residing at the centre. Without regret, I lent the money to the client.
Jason/Ch 1	In fact, the crystallization of knowledge helped me to look at things from more than one aspect. As time goes by, I have noticed that I have changed, so I would not be too insistent on my initial view. When there were different views, I would step back and listen, and think about what others were saying. After evaluating its reasonableness, I would decide whether to accept a view or not. In general, I found myself able to think more clearly and have a better overall understanding.
Polly/Ch 4	Whether genuinely in need or manipulative, or nuisance sex callers. Workers could play a better role in handling them tactfully in order to solicit growth in the clients, no matter how small the window for growth.
Joyce/Ch 5	In 1997, I left the executive committee and focused on staying with the OND of the Hotline. I enjoy OND, as the night-long duty provides a more relaxed environment for the counsellor. It has fewer time constraints than daytime duty, when volunteers might wish to leave on time for their next appointment. There are also fewer repeat callers and more workable clients. I feel job satisfaction on most OND shifts when I notice that clients have benefited from the conversation.
Joyce/Ch 5	I did not label the two incidents immediately after their occurrence. However, with more Buddhism knowledge that I have acquired in recent years, I would describe that I was in a state of mindfulness, a stage of selflessness and extreme joy when the experience came.
Mr Lau/Ch 7	I share my experiences, both in my personal life and in SBHK. I tried to pass on practical skills to the younger generation about how to handle certain clients. These skills include noting and controlling the speed of speech of the client; paying attention to emotional words; controlling my own curiosity by not asking unnecessary questions; listening carefully instead of applying any unnecessary psychological knowledge; and focusing on the unhappy incidents rather than the process of how clients became unhappy.



- Mr Lau/Ch 7 I apply the same rule of confidentiality in my working environment as in SBHK with my clients. This is extremely important for setting up a safe atmosphere between two persons in communication, especially for ladies. I am good at this kind of self-discipline, and have earned a reputation as a good listener in my office.
- Ms Cheung/Ch 9 If one of us left, there might be a breakdown in the bond, with more and more volunteers leaving. Perhaps, this sort of mutual bonding was tacitly affecting each team member to maintain the full force of the team.
- Stephen/Ch 10 I discovered that my core source of internal peacefulness comes from helping other people to overcome difficulties and growth.
- Vincent/Ch 11 Instead of asking the Exco to change the policy to deploy more staffing for OND, I took the initiative to form a group of special volunteers who could take more ONDs. As it was approaching year 2000, I named the group 'The Samaritans Beyond'. I remembered that there were about a hundred members on the volunteer contact list. I called them up one by one and told them about the philosophy of the 'Samaritan Beyond' and asked for their support to report for OND once per month, regardless of their marital status and gender.
- Vincent/Ch 11 It was the feeling of being aligned with the good deeds or virtues of the universe. This was to say that suddenly I seemed to be able to understand plenty of things more in depth, such as trust, love, empathy, creativity, generosity and compassion. I felt that my whole person had changed, and that it was a change towards something holistic. It was holistic for me, and holistic for the world and the universe.
- Vincent/Ch 11 I remember that I had a feeling like my heart was blossoming with beautiful flowers a few days after, when I awoke at 5 am. The ancient Egyptians and Eastern religions have the metaphor of the lotus flower, the beauty that emerges from the mud, the symbol of primordial beginnings in base matter.
- Vincent/Ch 11 My experience on the bus was the moment when I suddenly, successfully, only for a moment hit the right frequency and I felt at once alignment with the world. Although the moment was short, it presented the greatest moment of human joy, happiness with glimpse of wisdom. Meditative religions speak about such moments using a different language, like the Buddhists speak of Nirvana; Hinduism of enlightenment and the highest Chakra; and Christianity of being suffused by the Holy Spirit. The human being and the universe are united in one.
- Vincent/Ch 11 I think that one of the reasons for some Hotline volunteers to serve so long is due to the fact that their regular practice of providing

empathetic responses to clients and their commitment to understanding clients' suffering have triggered their intrinsic drive to follow the path of a selfless life. Their practice of empathy, which is a state of selflessness to get rid of one's own interest and to open one self and mind to occupy others, stimulates their thoughts to gradually look for wisdom of life, which is closely related to selflessness.

Selflessness does not equate to altruism. A person may sacrifice his time, effort, energy or even life for another person. It is a kind of selflessness. However, there are other areas that come into play. While selfishness refers to a state of mind when a person is devoted to or cares only for self or primarily his or her own interests, benefits or welfare, regardless of others, selflessness seems to be something more noble than, yet encompasses not being selfish. It includes the unimportance and non-existence of self. Selflessness is related to our mode of existence, which also relates to human potential.

Selflessness is not only an action of unselfishness: it is more a state of mind in which we can step out of our own interests. Much mental activity is related to selflessness, for instance open-mindedness, as in the case of epoché for suspension of judgement or pre-supposition or, like Jason, not to insist on one's own initial view; detachment of own desire, for example Polly tolerating nuisance callers by looking for any window on their growth; or putting aside personal interest, experience or value, as in the case of Ms Cheung's staying with the service for bonding the team. Therefore, practising selflessness is not limited to any particular action to sacrifice bodily benefits of time, energy or even life. It is an attitude of life to respect other people and things and their natural order. Subjective intervention of any kind could prompt a contradiction of selflessness.

#### *7.3.5 Empathy makes counselling a wisdom-fostering activity*

According to MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79) for the development of wisdom people need to develop the characteristics of wisdom, including relevant perspectives, values and relevant intellectual knowledge, and incorporate these into their lives. He suggested the following nine wisdom-fostering activities:

A clear understanding of what wisdom is

Counselling and various kinds of psychotherapy

Intellectual knowledge that is relevant to the kind of wisdom that we are trying to develop

Full and varied life experience

Feedback and counsel from wise people

The observation of behaviour – our own and others

Practices that help us to internalize values

Body-awareness practices

Meditation.

*“Becoming a wiser person is an exercise in inner development, and there are activities that can help us along the way. Counselling and other forms of psychotherapy can, if we need them, help us reach the starting point for advanced work which we might call responsible adulthood or mature ego”* (MacDonald, 2016: item 2) Although MacDonald did not elaborate on why counselling and other forms of psychotherapy can help people to reach the starting point for advanced work of a responsible adulthood or mature ego, I am convinced by my own experience and supported by the literature to believe that selflessness, in the form of empathy, has a role in such practice.

According to Roger, empathy as a process has three elements, as a skill: congruence; unconditional positive regard; and empathy (Mearns and Thorne, 1988). Empathy as a skill refers to the practice of trying to think in the way of the client, feel what the client feels in the same situation and therefore understand the client wholeheartedly. To do this, again a counsellor needs to step out from his/her ‘self’ and to integrate into the ‘self’ of the client. Such stepping out of one ‘self’, in practice, refers to how a counsellor abandons his/her own thoughts, knowledge and expectations and tries to open his/her mind/heart to perceive the client’s situation. This process of abandoning one’s ‘self’ for the benefit of the client is what Maslow called a B-oriented motivation. It is an important process to get in touch with the stage of selflessness and hence the wisdom of life. However, I am not saying that a counsellor should totally dissolve himself/herself into a client’s situation and forget about the counselling role. I am just saying that, only in term of empathy, what a counsellor should do. In fact, a counsellor

does have other roles in a counselling session. While a counsellor is exercising empathy as a skill and a process, he or she remains conscious of his/her roles to lead the process.

I think that one of the reasons for some Hotline volunteers to serve so long is their regular practice of providing empathic responses to clients and their devotion to understanding clients' suffering. These have triggered a drive for them to follow a path of a selfless life (see a number of examples of selfless behaviour of volunteer in section 7.3.4 above). Their exercise of empathy was a state of selflessness to get rid of one own interests and to open one 'self' and mind to occupy others. I support Ms Cheung's view of the possibility of internalizing empathy into oneself. I also believe that such internalization of empathy into oneself reflects the importance of empathy as a way of practice for selflessness, where the latter is a key element to obtain a higher wisdom of life. Table 26 below summarizes Ms Cheung's and my view on empathy:

**Table 26 Summary of Ms Cheung's and Vincent's view on empathy**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	I admit that I learned the active listening skill afresh. I applied the skills and subsequently internalized them as part of me. Such internalization allowed me to communicate with my clients purposefully. This congruency, sometimes called authenticity, is important in exhibiting empathy.
Vincent/Ch 11	I think that one of the reasons for some Hotline volunteers to serve so long is that their regular practice of providing empathic responses to clients and their commitment to understanding clients' suffering have triggered their intrinsic drive to follow the path of a selfless life. Their practice of empathy, which is a state of selflessness to get rid of one's own interest and to open one self and mind to occupy others, stimulates their thoughts to gradually look for wisdom of life, which is closely related to selflessness.

In fact, the practice of selflessness is something that volunteers might not have thought of before. However, as they were unconsciously practising in this direction, they might understand only that they have an internal drive to help other people as far as possible. They were willing to sacrifice their other activities in order to fulfil the demands of SBHK to maintain their membership, but they might not be aware of the benefits of such practice towards understanding the wisdom of life. They just follow

their hearts to continue the service as part of human virtue (*praxis*) to carry out good deeds.

### 7.3.6 Christianity and Buddhism

Four of the interviewed volunteers were Christians when they joined SBHK. They carried out service in SBHK as if they served their church. They continued to treasure life, and one of them even wished to focus more in this direction to serve God. She decided to spend more time in service to God than in SBHK. Table 27 summarizes the volunteers' introduction of their Christianity:

**Table 27 Summary of volunteers' mentions of Christianity**

Source	Quote
Tooyoung/Ch 3	I believe that it is a Christian's duty to help others. I have adopted this value without question. Becoming one of the Samaritan Befrienders, I can help others regularly. I believe that Jesus Christ should receive a good impression of me!
Polly/Ch 4	Since I have been a Christian since my secondary schooldays, I follow the caring and loving principles as a Christian in all possible ways. Since becoming a nurse and a Hotline volunteer serve the same goal – to care for other people – the two tasks complement each other.
Robert/Ch 8	Coincidentally, I saw the recruitment advertisement for SBHK and thought that suicide prevention was a great thing to do and that it was one of the things that I could do, under the umbrella of the church, to serve in the community.
Ms Cheung/Ch 9	When I found that my call to serve God was more important than serving in SBHK, I started to struggle with my time between serving God and SBHK. The service for God deserved the best of me.

Five of the volunteers either started following Buddhism or had already been practising Buddhism or mindfulness in different ways. They talked about the Buddhist concepts of living in the present moment; letting go of the past; having nothing to bother about; how life is unpredictable; or just following the nature. They went to retreat camps, meditated and even went to visit holy places. I was a Roman Catholic and was baptized at the age of 16. However, I had no hesitation in exploring the concept of mindfulness, which is a Buddhist concept. The quotes in Table 28 summarize the volunteers' involvement in Buddhist activities or concepts.

**Table 28 Summary of quotes on volunteers' involvement in Buddhist activities or concepts**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Han/Ch 2	I am learning about Buddhism now. I notice that Buddhism also advocates letting go of our sadness by living in the present moment, or the concept of living here and now.
Han/Ch 2	I think that, as a human being, I might not be so conscious of being able to detach myself from bad feelings immediately if something tragic happened. However, I am confident that I would, after a while, have the ability to 'wake up' and remind myself that there are choices for me. In brief, my Hotline experience has allowed me to see the possibility of making a positive choice, even if an unfortunate event did happen. With a rational choice, I would be able to let go of the sadness and find a new way out.
Han/Ch 2	There are commonalities between counselling and Buddhism belief. The concept of living in the present moment and putting past sad experience aside is always the ultimate way to live a better and happy life.
Han/Ch 2	From this case, I understand that life is not always controllable; we should treasure what we have while we do not suffer from a similar sickness.... However, this experience over the Hotline keeps reminding me of the importance of letting go of unhappiness and how unpredictable the world is.
Joyce/Ch 5	Without coming into conflict with the helping principles of SBHK of not actively using religion as a tool, I added to my personal insight in handling clients. I might apply several concepts such as 'living here and now' and 'everything comes from your heart', which are in fact 'how you look at the world (things or people), and how such a world affects your thoughts and emotions'.
Joyce/Ch 5	I began a new page in my time on OND in late 2011 after I had spent two years learning about Indian Buddhism.
Robert/Ch 8	The world is the same. There is no perfect world and most things do not operate according to our plans and expectations.
Stephen/Ch 10	Everyone would feel the same kind of shame and helplessness when a beloved one passed away. I reflected that life is always so unpredictable and we have to live with this.

It appears that members with Christian backgrounds have remained Christian and continue to devote their effort to serving God. However, it is worth noting that other non-Christian members started to learn Buddhism or mindfulness at different stages of

their time in SBHK. They might have various personal or more practical reasons to do it but, to me, it appears that they are unintentionally embarking on ways to explore the journey to wisdom, as Buddhism plays a major part in the development of wisdom in Eastern parts of the world. In fact, I met two other SBHK members at my mindfulness retreat camp in 2010.

MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79) proposed nine wisdom-fostering activities. Among them are meditation or mindfulness practices. The engagement of volunteers in Buddhism, mindfulness or meditation reflects an internal drive towards learning and being better at what they do and how they do it. To them, it might just be following their internal desire to look for another way of life which might be more peaceful and satisfying. Without much academic exploration or special peak experience, they would not associate their practice with the word 'wisdom'. In fact, I think most people who practice mindfulness, Buddhism or meditation would not consider themselves as being in active pursuit of wisdom.

Similarly, I think that not many professional counsellors or practitioners of psychotherapy would consider that they are actively developing wisdom. I would suggest that the continual practice of empathy and being with people in pain for long periods of time shapes the being of the practitioner in a way that makes others begin to see them as wise.

As Confucius says, 'knowledge' which can be practiced is a component of wisdom. The continuous acquisition of knowledge is vital for the development of Samaritan members. The practice of an empathetic response to clients allows members to experience things that they might not really experience in their own lives. Since people with suicide ideation are at their lowest ebb, an empathetic journey with these people really allows the volunteers to have an in-depth learning experience. The knowledge and experience are vital in sustaining in them what Maslow referred to as B-cognition (Maslow, 1968).

### *7.3.7 Following the natural order*

Some volunteers maintained that they followed where their lives led. Some of them might call it 'following the natural order' of life. Table 29 summarizes their views on this 'natural order'.

**Table 29 Summary of comments on following the nature order**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Jason/Ch 1	I mentioned that I might have chosen to join one of the forces such as the Royal Hong Kong Regiment or the Civil Aid Services. However, I did not see their recruitment advertisement before I saw SBHK's. It was just a coincident that I have joined SBHK despite the fact that such coincidence lasts so long.
Han/Ch 2	Unless there is a major change in my life, such as changes in family life that results in my having less spare time available for me, I will continue with my service.
Joyce/Ch 5	...I decided to follow the path that led to management work in SBHK. I consider running SBHK to be equal importance as manning the frontline services. Training, publishing and promotional work are all activities that promote suicide prevention.
Joyce/Ch 5	If I felt it was right to leave SBHK, I would do so. As no one knows about the future, I cannot tell if that will happen. However, Perhaps I will not leave SBHK so long as I can take the overnight shift!
Joyce/Ch 5	I tried my best to fix the issues, although they still depended on many other factors. I am not pessimistic but it is a natural order. No matter how well the organization functioned in the past, it still has a date by which it will end. It is natural.
Joyce/Ch 5	Perhaps it is my immanent drive does not want me to twist my personality at home. It is not about whether something was right or wrong. I was what I was at that time.
Mr Lau/Ch 7	When I finish a call, I mean 'finish'. I have done my best. Nothing can affect or discourage me.... This requires a mature attitude and a true understanding of the limitation of the Hotline service.
Robert/Ch 8	The world is the same. There is no perfect world and most things do not operate according to our plans and expectations. This is why ups and downs are the usual components of our lives. While the culture of the organization has been established for over 60 years, SBHK, like human beings, has its fate.



In fact, this idea of following the natural order, that is, where life takes you, was a view taken by the Cynics and the Sceptics in ancient Greece. According to Diogenes Laertius (IX.62):

*“He was consistent with this view (i.e. suspension of judgement) in his manner of living, neither avoiding anything nor watching out for anything. Taking everything as it came, whether it be wagons or precipices or dogs, and all such things, relying on his senses for nothing. He was kept alive by his acquaintances who followed him around, according to the school of Antigonos of Carystus. Aenesidemus, however, says that he only theorized about the suspension of judgement, whereas he did not actually act improvidently.”* (Inwood and Gerson 1997: 285, in Curnow, 2010: 103)

Suspension of judgement is also part of the *epoché* mentioned by Husserl (1931) in transcendental phenomenology, which is also a form of selflessness, I would argue. Besides, the Cynics presented ‘wisdom’ in the form of the one with detachment, the one with no personal interest, the representation of the ‘natural’ as opposed to the conventional or artificial. They were indeed talking about the importance of selflessness.

## **Chapter 8      Conclusion**

With the help of the data analysis in Chapter 7, I conclude that five major areas might hint at volunteers' potential for a long stay in the service during the intake or selection stage. These are only a hint as experience shapes a person over time and nothing can be truly predictive, nor is it the intention of this work to offer predictions on how people will come to behave before they have been exposed to the experiences. Reasons behind the retention of volunteers can be considered. First is how personal prerequisites such as childhood experience affect their passion to serve; second are their motives, satisfaction and perceived meaningfulness of the task; and third is how volunteers play their roles within the organization to encourage the retention of others. The fourth is how the policy and management style of the organization can facilitate a long stay and, last but not least, fifth is the hypothesis that engagement in counselling work is a wisdom-fostering activity that certain people might have been drawn to through their personality or as a response to formative experiences in their lives.

The following sections provide a short description of these five areas and summary tables.

### **8.1      How personal prerequisites affect the passion to serve suicidal clients**

#### *8.1.1   Generosity and independence*

One female volunteer displayed a very generous attitude by helping her very young neighbour to get to school every day for several years. It was an extraordinary, unconditional service offered by the volunteer. The selflessness and humble attitude at this early age reflected a passionate heart for helping in this volunteer. Her independence in making such a decision was remarkable, and I think that the trust of her mother contributed.

Two male volunteers also displayed independence in childhood, which provided them with experiences to face various situations, including adversity. Their courage and experiences are vital to Hotline clients, as most are not decisive enough when facing

such situations. Nonetheless, less independent volunteers might more readily understand the generally indecisive clients. It is inconclusive whether an independent childhood makes for long-serving volunteers.

#### *8.1.2 The influence of parental authority*

As mentioned in previous chapters, there were both stringent, authoritative and conservative parents and liberal and considerate parents. The effect of different parenting styles might not be so clear cut as to affect the passion of volunteers. However, the experience of different parenting styles did affect the development of volunteers. Therefore, it is more important to know if volunteers understand how their parents influenced their development. Such information is vital for the self-awareness of the volunteers and, perhaps, how they understand the parental influence on their clients.

#### *8.1.3 Peer group introduction*

Three volunteers among the eleven volunteers examined in the research were introduced to SBHK by an ex-SBHK member. The involvement of ex-members might help as a 'buddy' outside SBHK who could help to provide sufficient information for the potential volunteers, even prior to their joining the service. As a result of a clear or better understanding of the service, their expectation of obtaining satisfaction through the existing policy or facilities of the service was addressed and the chance of their retention in the service was deemed to be higher. This situation matches the opinion of Hyde et al. (2016), where the retention of novice volunteers is regarded as higher if the satisfaction and social connections of the volunteers could be improved, in this case by their trusted friends who understood the operation of SBHK well.

#### *8.1.4 Past emotional experience*

Two volunteers had been helped by a teacher or social worker in their childhood to understand the importance and power of active listening. Another two volunteers had personal experience of cases of suicide. It appears that such experiences have some influence on the choice to serve a suicide prevention agency. Their attention to the need for a compassionate life was seemed to be brought to a more conscious level in

their life. They seemed to be more ready to live a compassionate life through helping strangers. In fact, helping strangers is one of the best ways for people to recover from childhood adversity (Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Therefore, exploration of such elements in choosing volunteers might have a positive return of long-serving volunteers. Table 30 summarizes how personal prerequisites affect passion to serve suicidal clients:

**Table 30 How personal prerequisites affect the passion to serve suicidal clients**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Generous helping attitude	Five out of 11 volunteers mentioned their general attitude to help other people. Some of them doing their according to their religious principles and some according to their heart. One exercised extraordinary generosity since childhood which reflected a very compassionate heart at early age. Such history of a compassionate attitude might provide good indicator of a stable service.
Free or independent childhood	Two male volunteers mentioned about their independent childhood and one female volunteer mentioned about her generosity and independency in deciding to carry out her generous offer. Although only three out of 11 (27%) volunteers discussed about their independent childhood, their courage and experiences were vital for the Hotline client as most clients were not decisive enough when facing such situation. Comparing the rest of the long-serving volunteer who did not have independent childhood, perhaps not as decisive as other, their empathy with the non-decisive clients could be better. It is therefore, inconclusive if independent childhood could be an indicator of long service of volunteers.
Parental attitudes	There were stringent, authoritative and conservative parents as well as liberal and considerate parents. It is more important for volunteers to be self-aware of how styles of parenting affected their development.
Peer group introduction	Three volunteers joined SBHK under the influence of peer friends who were ex-members. It could be an extension of social support for the volunteer to understand the nature of the work outside the organization. It is indirectly supported by Hyde et al. (2016) for retention of novice volunteers.
Past emotional experience	At least four volunteers came out positively from their past emotion experience. With such experience volunteers might be easier to empathize with other people. It seems to be important to understand if potential volunteers had escaped from their bad emotional experience or not. If so, their experience could help both task and stay.

## **8.2 Motive, satisfaction, perceived meaningfulness of the task and personal growth and development of volunteers**

### *8.2.1 Satisfaction with self or other-oriented motives*

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of the satisfaction of volunteers. Lammers (1991) noticed that volunteers enjoyed having the responsibility of handling challenging services or interesting tasks. This echoed March and Simon's (1958) finding on feelings of job satisfaction and compatibility with the service. Stevens (1991) stated that satisfaction could come from their perceived recognition and appreciation by other people. As volunteers are human, it is not difficult to understand that they would be more willing to remain in a service with which they feel satisfied. In fact, it would be difficult to understand why volunteers would want to stay in a service where no satisfaction could be felt. For instance, a self-oriented motive is important to novice volunteers, and an other-oriented motive is important to sustained volunteers (Handy et al., 2006). Alexander (2000) viewed that the volunteers who joined a service for altruistic reasons would serve longer, while Omoto and Snyder (1993) acknowledged that volunteers joining for self-esteem and growth might stay for a long time. Indeed. The literature supporting different motives is quite diverse and it might also depend on what kind of voluntary service they were involved in. Although I tend to agree with the finding of Mesch et al. (1998) that volunteers joining a service for the opportunity to learn for their career development foresee quitting, whether or not their expectations were finally satisfied, Rubin and Thorelli (1984) discovered that volunteers may have a change in motivation during their service. This makes the motive-related theories shaky. Furthermore, sometimes it might be difficult to categorize whether volunteers join for other-oriented motives purely to help others or whether they do so to obtain the satisfaction of helping others. The latter might render an other-oriented motive a self-oriented one!

### *8.2.2 Meaningful task*

A number of studies such as by Hackman and Oldham (1976) and Gidron (1985) concluded that a meaningful job was important to attract and retain volunteers. However, it is not surprising to see an exception to this in Mesch et al. (1998), who

stated that perceived meaningfulness does not have a significant influence on retention for stipended volunteers. In fact, five of eleven volunteers expressed a perception of meaningfulness in the tasks at SBHK. I think that it would be rather difficult to convince a volunteer to carry out a voluntary duty for over twenty years if the volunteer could not perceive meaning in the task. Without doubt, helping others to prevent them from injuring themselves is an indisputable virtue, per se.

### *8.2.3 Feeling personal growth and development*

Members generally agreed on their experience of ‘helping others helps myself’. They gained a wide spectrum of knowledge across the service. They understood the pace of society and obtained knowledge that they might not be able to acquire from their daily lives or professional careers.

Some members reported that their interaction with clients had reminded them of how to avoid getting into similar situations. They felt the benefit of growing and developing their insights, skills, personalities and potential in this service environment. They had the chance to improve their counselling skills or carry out other non-Hotline duties as trainers, group leaders or executive committee members. All these opportunities allowed them to feel that they were growing and developing together with the service. In fact, Aristotle acknowledged an intrinsic drive for human to feel happy with success in growth, even vegetative as a plant or appetitive as an animal, and more uniquely in being rational as a human being (Cooper, 2012; Curnow, 2010). Feelings of personal growth when serving in the organization would foster members to stay with it. This may not only be instigated by the member or the organization but also by the nature of the service.

Table 31 below summarizes the conclusions about the effect of the motive, satisfaction and perceived meaningfulness of the task, and personal growth and development in volunteers.

**Table 31 Motive, satisfaction and perceived meaningfulness of the task**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
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Satisfaction on self or other-oriented motives	The literature supporting different motives are quite diversified and it might also depend on what kind of voluntary service they were involved. Literature also stated that motives of volunteers could change from time to time. In fact, it was not uncommon for the same volunteer to have both self and other-oriented motives. Sometimes, it is different to distinguish if a motive is for one self or other. Typical example is the case when volunteer felt satisfaction for being able to help other. Given the variations, it is non-conclusive if which type of motives govern the satisfaction or long service of volunteers.
Meaningful task	Literature acknowledged the need of feeling meaningful for a task and volunteers generally agreed that the hotline service is a meaningful task for them. As the such, the perceived meaningfulness of the suicide pervention job is a reason for the long service of the volunteers.
Feeling personal growth and development	The feeling of personal growth in both counselling related area or not is important for volunteers to stay in the service. Volunteers reported growth and development in term of 'helping others help myself' or through their exploration of their diffeent potentials in varous management or training position. Such feeling of growth could lead to basic form of vegative or appetitive happiness as suggested by Artistole.

### **8.3 How volunteers play their roles among themselves to encourage retention**

#### *8.3.1 Overcoming difficulties by bonding with other members*

A number of volunteers experienced their difficult period at the beginning of their service. They lacked confidence to handle clients and thought of leaving the service. However, they did not leave, as they were able to find support from their fellow volunteers who were serving at the same time. The offer of direct support after handling cases or the general bonding of friendship developed among the team had a great impact on their retention.

Therefore, it is fair to say that the kindness of befriending within an organization is an important factor in volunteer retention, and should be formalized and encouraged.

#### *8.3.2 Devotion to client*

A general attitude of devoting time and patience to clients was commonly found among the long-serving volunteers. In fact, some extended their devotion by committing more effort for the benefit of clients, such as further study of counselling

or organizing extra overnight duties to meet demand. This attitudinal commitment shows the loyalty and willingness of volunteers to make extra efforts for the organization (Guest, 1992). Such devotion might set an example to other volunteers or it might allow other volunteers to be touched by this selfless and unconditional offer. Such personal initiatives of volunteer should be encouraged and make known to other volunteers.

Table 32 below summarizes how volunteers play their roles among themselves to encourage retention:

**Table 32 Summary of how volunteers play their roles among themselves to encourage retention**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Overcoming difficulties by bonding with other members	A number of volunteers experienced their difficult period at the beginning of service. However, they were able to find support from fellow volunteers. Literature agreed that social support and bonding of volunteers are powerful factor for the retention of volunteer. Such social support is apparently more important for any stressful working environment such as a suicide prevention service centre.
Devotion to client	Literature says that attitudinal commitment showed the loyalty and willingness of volunteers to take up extra effort for the organization. Such devotion might set samples to other volunteers or they might allow other volunteers to feel touched by their selfless and unconditional offer. Additional overnight duties or voluntary academic advancement on counselling skills offered by volunteers might develop a good volunteer culture for mutual imitation, learning or encouragement. In fact, my offer to write a book for SBHK is again an attitudinal commitment to affect other volunteers.

#### **8.4 How the policy and management style of the organization facilitates long stay or retention**

##### **8.4.1 Goal of the organization**

Suicide prevention, the goal of SBHK, already provides a very good ground for the retention of volunteers. Most agreed with the mission of the organization and considered that there is a social need to provide such service. There is a resonance between the organization and the members to achieve this goal (Sokolowski, 1996) and this fostered the stay of volunteers. The perceived meaningfulness of the service



would continue to drive them, as Hackman and Oldham (1976) as well as Gidron (1985) suggested. The nature of the service, involving handling life and death cases, and the need to keep cases confidential increase both the challenge and volunteers' interest in maintaining their membership (Lammers, 1991, and March and Simon, 1958). Therefore, it is important for SBHK or other organizations with a perceived meaningful service to maintain their goals and mission in order to retain an attraction for volunteers.

Since 2000, SBHK had expanded from one volunteer-based Hotline centre to four centres, with the addition of SCIC, LEC and Caring Funds, which are all staff-based centres. It is important to maintain the original goal of the organization and, more importantly, the role of volunteers in the overall organizational structure, so that they continue to feel that they contribute to the organization.

#### *8.4.2 The SERVER model*

The management style of SBHK complies with the SERVER model of McCudden (2000) in many aspects. Its ability to retain so many volunteers to serve for more than twenty to thirty years or more is also a fact. It appears that the SERVER model sets a good example of what an organization needs to do in order to provide the right working environment to nurture long-serving volunteers. There is a need for a continuous, professional and flexible supporting structure of training and supervision. There should be an open, transparent and documented volunteering policy. Volunteers should be given opportunities to change the roles to meet their needs at different stages of their development. Development into group leader, debriefer, lecturer, trainer, role-play facilitator or even director should be possible without any mandatory requirements. Thus, volunteers can explore their different potentials in a safe environment.

Moreover, there should be regular and open evaluation and monitoring to ensure the quality and commitment of the volunteers, especially in a suicide prevention agency, as the quality of work has to be accountable to the public. This provides additional challenge and responsibility for the volunteers and is considered fruitful for their retention (Lammers, 1991; March and Simon, 1958). Lastly, there should be personal

and professional relationships founded on openness, understanding and genuineness across members and management personnel.

#### *8.4.3 An organization to be proud of*

The long history of SBHK (57 years as at 2017) is a solid foundation for the organization. However, if we go back to the year that the long-serving volunteers joined, SBHK then only had just 20 to 30 years of history. If serving in an organization to be proud of is a factor of retention, SBHK has had to maintain that status all that time. In retrospect, SBHK has maintained its philosophy by focusing on quality rather than quantity when recruiting, selecting and training volunteers. Qualified volunteers were proud of their status and their ability to handle critical suicidal clients. Society at large also acknowledged the general performance of this organization and its support to the organization has never ceased. The successful expansion to service centres with more professional staff and government support in providing subvention to the SCIC also injected more confidence into volunteers serving in this highly recognized organization. The size of SBHK, with its present level of staffing (employees and volunteers) and its financial capital, renders it one of the biggest suicide prevention NGOs in the world.

A good reputation and acknowledgement by the public is a by-product of the good work of an organization. It cannot be fostered intentionally, but is built up as time goes on. I think that making its volunteers proud is a reminder to the management of any organization to protect its history and reputation by ensuring good quality volunteers and performance through the management system. Reputation needs to be built over years of good work, but can be ruined in one day!

#### *8.4.4 Flexibility and autonomy*

High levels of flexibility and autonomy for volunteers provides them with a sense of freedom. Everyone in the world likes to enjoy freedom. Such freedom provides less stress for people during their tenure. Hong Kong, in particular, is a small but metropolitan city. Living here is dynamic, as physical access to anywhere is not time consuming. Therefore, people in Hong Kong enjoy fast and multiple live activities. Flexibility in the roster and appraisal system at the Hotline allows volunteers to meet their different needs or even undergo major changes in life. This will, of course,

enhance the stay of the volunteers. The flexibility of the therapeutic approach in the service, changes to the volunteers' roles and even becoming directors and overseeing the development of the organization testify to the great autonomy. The level of trust is mutually beneficial between volunteers and the organization. It seems to be a very important factor in the retention of volunteers.

#### 8.4.5 *Physical needs*

The necessity of a convenient location for the service centre (Gidron, 1983) is similar to the easy transportation access insisted upon by the management of SBHK to prevent unnecessary turnover of volunteers. Monetary subsidies, as suggested by Knapp and Davis Smith (1995), are nice to have. Of course, this would be subject to the financial status of the organization. As in case of SBHK, some volunteers might even donate the transportation allowance to the organization, rendering this element not as definitive as it expected. Nevertheless, some physical needs such as a comfortable working environment, a seat or bed (for rest), computer and Wi-Fi, snacks and drinks might fulfil some physical needs of the volunteers. Reasonable provision of materials to suit the personal needs of volunteers might not have the same weight in retaining volunteers as the provision of a flexible and autonomous working environment. However, it indicates care for the volunteers and reduces any dissatisfaction that might be felt by them. Any organization that can afford it should endeavour to satisfy such needs.

Table 33 below summarizes how the policy and management style of the organization facilitates the long stay or retention of volunteers:

**Table 33 How the policy and management style of an organization facilitates long service**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Goal of the organization	Suicide prevention as the goal of SBHK already provides a very good ground for the perception a meaningful task for the volunteers. Most member agreed that there is social needs for such a service. Their retention in the service was associated with the perceived meaningfulness of the SBHK. Provided that SBHK does not change its goal, volunteers who can perceived the meaningfulness of suicide prevention would not leave the task unless there great change to their lives.

SERVER model	<p>SBHK in many ways reflected the success for retention of volunteer by complying with elements offered by the SERVER model. There was a continuous, professional and flexible supporting structure of training and supervision. There was open and transparent and documented volunteering policy. Volunteers are given opportunities to change the roles to meet their needs. The development into group leader, debriefer, lecturer, trainer, role-play facilitator or even director is possible without any mandatory requirement. Besides, there was regular and open evaluation and monitoring system to ensure the quality and commitment of the volunteer. There were also personal and professional relationship found on openness, understanding and genuineness across members and the management personnel. While the management principles of SBHK matches with the elements of the SERVER model, the large number of long service volunteers provided a solid proof of the reliability of the model.</p>
A organization to be proud of	<p>With a background of more than fifty years in running a suicide prevention Hotline and the latest development of SBHK in developing new service, there was no adverse comment received from volunteer about the development. The volunteers are generally proud of their membership despite they were not allowed to make use of their volunteer status for private or business promotion. The hardship to obtain the initial qualification after the year-long <i>ab initio</i> training and to maintain the membership over the annual appraisal system provided a sense of pride to them.</p>
Flexibility and autonomy	<p>Nearly all volunteer appreciated the flexibility and autonomy of the service. Whether it was in the roles to be played by them, the skills they can use to handle client or the appraisal system, volunteers in general enjoyed the flexibility. As suggested by literature, these flexibility and autonomy were essential to retain volunteers.</p>
Physical needs (location and monetary reward)	<p>Two volunteers indirectly confirmed my observation on how the ease of access to the centre could affect the turnover rate of volunteers. Volunteers joined the service for a long time might not be easily affected by an inconvenience located centre. However, novice volunteers for a start might have more consideration for the location before their feeling of inaccessibility could be overridden by other more positive considerations mentioned above. Unless there is an absolute need to move location, accessibility should be carefully weighted for any new location of the centre. Apart from physical location, monetary rewards were only nice to have as no volunteers ever mentioned this against the</p>

recommendation by literature.

#### *8.4.6 Explicit reasons*

From the above considerations, I think that keeping an autonomous volunteer-friendly management style in an organization is a more important factor than identifying the correct personal attributes of volunteer during their intake. In fact, most of the terms of service of volunteers that are reported in the literature do not reflect the volunteers who served this single organization for twenty to thirty years or more. The factors quoted might not be totally compatible with the case of SBHK. Nevertheless, some were still meant to explain the long service of volunteers, especially those on the role of the organization, where SBHK did display similar roles.

In terms of the personal prerequisites mentioned above, I could only accept some of them as possible attributes or history that an organization might take into consideration during their recruitment. Human beings change every day. There is no chance for anyone to predict which new recruit would be serving thirty years or more into the future. However, an organization can still provide a good environment to nurture potential volunteers. As suggested above, a number of continuous works by the organization have to be undertaken to foster such an environment where volunteers come to give their service as a habit in their daily life and treat the organization as part of their family.

### **8.5 Potential drive on a journey for wisdom of life, activated through regular selfless service**

#### *8.5.1 Tacit reasons*

Having concluded which factors for retention could generally be perceived and understood by people or the volunteers themselves, as one of the long-serving volunteers I discovered another reason for long service that volunteers might be unaware of. Very similar to the concept of 'helping others helps myself', which was mostly agreed on by the volunteers, it seems that suicide prevention hotline services provide an environment for the growth and development of volunteers. Such a feeling of growth and development was felt by volunteers as a positive factor for their stay. Indeed, I would say that such feelings of growth and development, for some people,

resonated with their potential drive in this direction. As Aristotle stated, human beings could find happiness through three aspects of its soul, namely the vegetative part, like a plant, in term of growth; the appetitive part, as an animal, in terms of movement and sense; and the rational part, unique to human being, in terms of reflection and thinking. That was the reason why the volunteers appreciated the service so much, and some even thought that what they earned was more than they contributed to clients. However, Aristotle added that the ultimate happiness of humans should come from their unique rational faculties.

Perhaps the feelings of enlightenment felt by Joyce or the peacefulness felt by Stephen (tranquillity by Pyrrho, in Curnow 2010: 104) were not a totally transcendent experience. Another experience of extraordinary happiness, reported by Joyce and my personal experience, as well as my literature search (James, 1901; Maslow, 1978; Speeth, 1989), inevitably provide testimony for the peak experience or transcendental enlightenment experiences that happen occasionally for some people. Maslow interviewed and researched over his whole life more than eighty people who had such an experience. In fact, the message that all these people brought to us was very similar. That is: they found the wisdom of life.

#### *8.5.2 The importance of selflessness towards wisdom*

While people enjoy the feeling of growth and development, they must also enjoy the feeling of getting wiser and wiser. It is a natural tendency in everyone. However, the only secret that I found out from the research is the relationship between selflessness and wisdom. I should not treat it as a secret, since the literature is readily available. The only difference is whether they can be linked in a more understandable manner or whether the general public pays attention to such phenomena.

While my transcendental experience reminded me of the importance of selflessness, and a number of studies by Maxwell (2007), Husserl (1931), Moustakas (1994), Maslow (1954, 1968, 1970), Pearce (2002) and Pattakos (2010) supported the idea of the importance of selflessness in achieving wisdom or the lack of sensation of our ordinary self during the mystic experience, as suggested by James (1901), MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79) and perhaps Young-Eisendrath (1996) provided me with an excellent link

between wisdom and counselling activities. With my Hotline experience that emphasize empathy, the linkage between all the elements was revealed more clearly:

Counselling, as a wisdom-fostering activity (McHenry, 2009: 79), requires the exercise of empathy (Mearns and Thorne, 1988); empathy is a practice of selflessness; selflessness is a mental state with a basic contraction of ego (Speeth, 1989). Earning sufficient selflessness experience (Maslow, 1970; Young-Eisendrath, 1996), plus some knowledge of positivity such as logotherapy, mindfulness, positive psychology (in my case), would provide a greater chance of obtaining peak experience under intense suffering – the second line of work in the school of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff (Ibid.). With the peak experience, the wisdom and joy of life are appreciated (Confucius, in Hinett, 2002: v), and this is supported by Aristotle's ethics of *eudaimonia* where the exercise of human virtue (selflessness, as I generalize it) is a means (*poiesis*) that could lead humans to a higher level of being where the ultimate happiness and theoretical wisdom of life is found.

Figure 17 below indicates the relationship between empathy, selflessness, *eudaimonia* and wisdom.

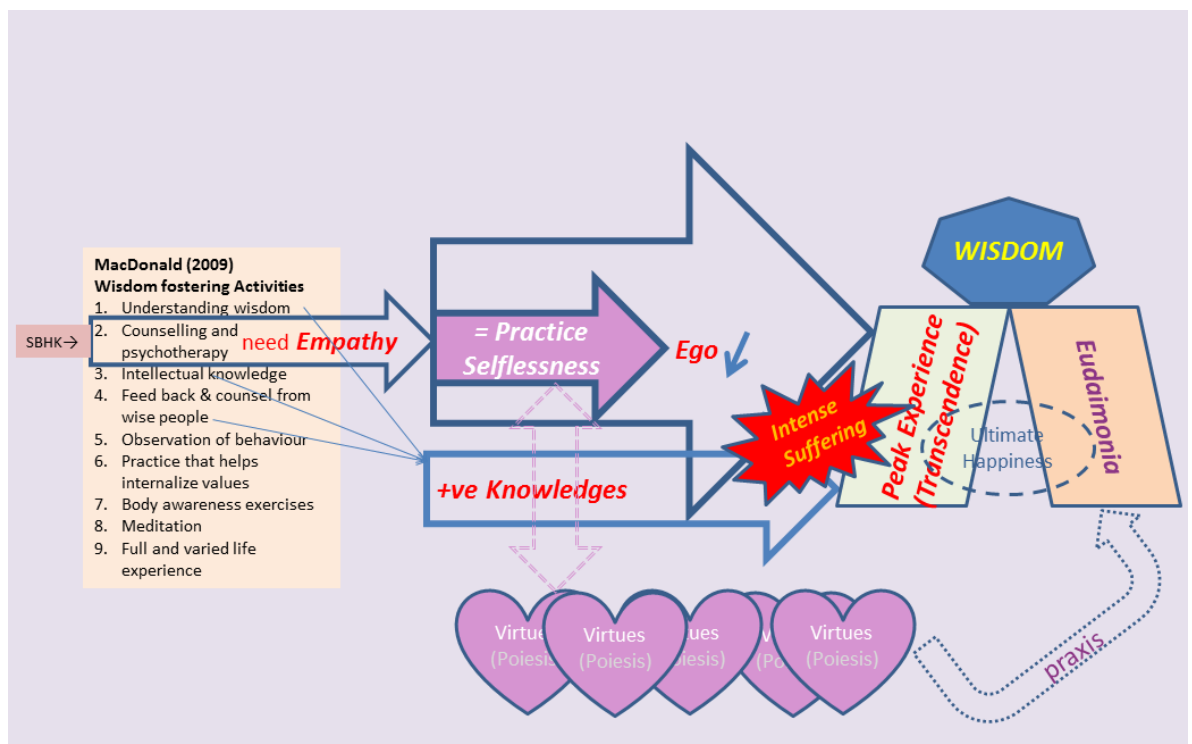


Figure 17 Relationship between empathy, selflessness, *eudaimonia* and wisdom

The nature of service on a suicide prevention hotline requires volunteers to be empathic with clients in times of intense suffering, so the effort of volunteers to empathize with them is more demanding than other services that are not life and death related. The extent of selflessness and empathy provided by volunteers in such roles and situations can be very intense as a person's life is at stake and the person's choice of to live or die is deeply influenced by the counsellor or helping individual. I think that such performance by volunteers is expressed commonly as a more challenging task, whereby volunteers would be interested to carry on when they felt the satisfaction of accomplishment (Lammers, 1991; March and Simon, 1958). However, there could be a hidden joy in being selfless that volunteers feel implicitly and do not express.

With support from the ancient Greek philosophers' views, I think that the real driving force for volunteers to continue might not be the overcoming of a challenging task but a natural drive for practising human virtue. Beside as an end (*praxis*) on the surface, it could also be as a means (*poiesis*) unconsciously, deep down, to seek for *eudaimonia*. This should be in terms of rationality (rather than vegetative or appetitive) for human beings, as Aristotle stated. Such rationality could possibly be achieved when human acquired the right knowledge to understand the true functioning of human beings in the world. With one of such knowledge, namely the importance of selflessness or with sufficient selflessness, human can see things more clearly and therefore make wise decisions. This was why Socrates mentioned that no man who had once learned the truth (natures of virtues) would be so stupid to act in opposing it, for he would be jeopardising his own interests.

The research of Maslow and Pearce, as well as Joyce's and my personal peak experience, support the likelihood of the *eudaimonic* state of happiness, even for a split-second peak experience when all the human goodness and even human existence in the universe were reportedly felt. According to Maslow (1978) and Pearce (2002), such peak experience involved an element of selflessness to occur. This is why I appeal for the practice of selflessness in the book. The more people practise selflessness, the closer they are to the destiny of wisdom. This was also supported by the experience of



Young-Eisendrath (1996) and the third tier of work proposed in the 'school' established by Gurdjieff (Speeth, 1989).

Among other things, five of the volunteers mentioned that they were engaged in Buddhism meditation or mindfulness practice, notwithstanding that fact that all of these activities are also wisdom-fostering activities, as suggested by MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79). It appears to me that the drive inside the long serving SBHK volunteers to seek ultimate human wisdom was apparent. , Although individual volunteers might have their own reasons for acting in this way. As the environment of SBHK asks of them the regular practice of empathy and that the individuals achieved some sense of peace or congruence in the constant drawing on their energies to help others, it matches with the path for human to understand the wisdom of life through selflessness. As such the volunteers would tend to stay in the service as long as possible. .

## **8.6 Overall conclusions**

As mentioned earlier, while the original intention of this research was to study the attributes of long-serving volunteers, the results indicated that most long-serving volunteers displayed a general attitude of helping other people. This could have been initiated by a number of factors, personal, social, cultural, life events and how they responded to them among other things. Only some past emotional experiences, whether related to suicide cases or not, had in this research a potential impact on volunteers' original intention to join the service. However, to predict the length of service over a period of twenty to thirty years from personal attributes is quite unsatisfactory, as the life and personal characteristics over such a long time will change.

There are roles that volunteers within the organization can take up that might foster the overall length of service by volunteers. The mutually supportive atmosphere among volunteers in this research and their uncompetitive relationships created genuine and long-lasting friendships among them. Furthermore, the common goal of suicide prevention and their devotion to clients by fulfilling their duties or even putting in extra effort such as self-study on counselling and carrying out extra overnight duties

did have a positive effect on their mutual encouragement. Building such bonds among workers is important for the retention of volunteers.

More important is the management style of the organization, which should be volunteer-friendly. A transparent, open and documented volunteer policy is essential to basic communication within the organization. A flexible and autonomous working environment such as for rosters, appraisals, counselling approaches and different roles of volunteers within the organization are appreciated by volunteers. Some physical needs such as a convenient location and daily rations and utilities at the centre expand the comfort at the service. Maintaining the good reputation of the organization and the quality of work make volunteers proud of their status and their perceived meaningful service is also important for their stay.

One last tacit element that breeds long-service volunteers at a counselling agency might be the drive for growth and development by individual volunteers. This matches the ingredients to provide selfless and empathic support towards clients. In my opinion, such regular practice of selflessness creates the conditions for an unintentional journey towards a state of wisdom. Their stay in the service could be a natural path they were on, supporting their own potential drive towards a better life of wisdom, ultimate happiness or *eudaimonia*.

## **8.7 Limitation of the research**

### ***8.7.1 Neglecting the built-in system of handling stressful situations***

As an insider–researcher, I enjoyed a familiar environment in terms of the people involved and the infrastructure and policy of the organization that I was researching. However, such cultural involvement might limit my thought during the research. A typical example is that the underlying assumptions of the researcher might not align with those of other researchers.

I recalled that in preparing the literature and when writing this document, I was always reminded to cover resilience (I prefer the word perseverance) in the volunteers. Although I included that part in the literature review, there were few quotes that I could refer to from the narratives of the ten participants in talking about their

perseverance. The best that I could relate the narratives to on this aspect was their devotion to clients, their consideration of suicide prevention as a meaningful task and their mutual support.

In fact, as a long-serving volunteer at SBHK, I can understand why volunteers did not mention too much on the topic of resilience or perseverance, as I shared similar thoughts that, as an insider-researcher, I had also neglected. When I talked about long-serving volunteers in SBHK, I was referring to those people who had worked in that environment for more than twenty years or even over thirty years. This was quite different from other volunteers mentioned in many studies, which might be talking about five to ten years of service. From the very beginning, the training and selection of volunteers in SBHK emphasizes that volunteers should only have a controlled emotion devoted to the clients' situation. That is to say that, when exercising empathy, volunteers still need to maintain a certain distance with their clients and keep a clear mind to find ways to help them. Volunteers who passed all the tests in the selection process did show this ability to position themselves well in the worker-client relationship. No matter how difficult the case they handled, the same principles applied. When volunteers had been serving in such a stressful situation for a long time (twenty years or more), they had full anticipation of what it would possibly be when they picked up a telephone. It could be an easy case or it could be a client with a very high suicidal risk to which they needed to pay extraordinary attention. With so many years of experience, all the necessary psychological components in facing such critical situations were all built-in with the volunteers.

As such, long-serving volunteers did not need to pay too much attention to how stressful handling a call might be. They applied the same learned skills and attitudes to manage these situations. In fact, there were volunteers reporting that they became calmer when facing emergency situations of their own. This proves that volunteers were gradually building up the strength to handle critical situations. Every reaction, whether positive or negative, for any given condition was well drilled over the years of service. There was nothing that would draw their special attention to overcoming situations that would possibly be considered by a third party as stressful. Hardship in handling a case seemed not to be an issue that would be relevant to their

perseverance in the service. This is the reason why no volunteers talked about their resilience or perseverance in their narratives.

Instead, volunteers might speak of pressure from squeezing their timetable to report for duty. The tension in making time for reporting duty among the need for studies, family affairs or religious devotions was constantly raised by different volunteers. It was in this respect that perseverance drew their attention.

The same situation also applied to me as a researcher. I did not feel any special need to elaborate on the perseverance of volunteers, no matter how stressful a call they had received. Everything seemed to be automatic for volunteers, except their tension about squeezing in the time for the service. With hindsight, this topic could have been brought to the surface during the guided conversation to see if more elaboration on the built-in system could be drawn out.

#### *8.7.2 Topic of wisdom was not brought to the discussion*

During the preparation stage of this research, I had advice not to raise the word 'wisdom' with participants. The consideration was to avoid pre-empting the participants thinking in a certain direction imposed by me. The plan was that I would extract what could be considered as wisdom from the narratives. It appears that there were pros and cons for this decision.

Without doubt, in the absence of any questions about what wisdom the participants had attained over the years, they were not guided in any direction. However, this lack of direction posed another problem regarding the lack of focus in terms of collecting the wisdom that they had acquired. With the benefit of hindsight and my latest understanding of both practical and theoretical wisdom, I should have preferred to ask a direct question about any wisdom they had acquired over their long service. For instance, if I was now asked about my insight on wisdom, I would be certain about the importance of selflessness and its relationship with wisdom and the universe. Similarly, whatever they reported could be easily brought up for discussion and comparison against the wisdom that I had referred to. It would be better than the current situation when the opportunity to ask such a question was missed. There was no easy way now

to make a similar comparison on the special experiences of Joyce and I with the other participants, if any.

### *8.7.3 Limited acceptance on the concept of selflessness and theoretical wisdom*

Although autoethnography allows narrators to speak out loud on what they think, feel or understand in the mini-culture, such advocacy is not unlimited in nature. Despite my full confidence and competence in advocating my view on selflessness and its relationship with the Hotline service on empathy, and thereafter, wisdom, transcendence and *eudaimonia*, I was held back from writing too much about it in this document as autoethnography, though subjective in nature, is still subject to a number of objective tests in traditional social science.

I must admit that the context that I advocated is not easily understood or accepted by some academics. During the research process, I had several opportunities to speak to different scholars, both local and overseas, on the issue of selflessness and why counselling was a wisdom-fostering activity. The only impression that I received was that they were not prepared to believe this, as this was something that they had never been taught, had never thought of, or was beyond their knowledge. On one occasion, a phenomenologist only started to consider my concept cautiously when I tabled MacDonald's view that counselling is one of the wisdom-fostering activities, as that person happened to be a counsellor.

By contrast, when I spoke about this to friends, whether new or old, their reactions were quite different. In my counselling sessions with clients, I infiltrated several concepts on the potential positive outcome of suffering, happiness and even wisdom to them. The general reaction from them was quite receptive and it was not very difficult for them to derive some preliminary meaning from what I wanted to say. Similarly, as a guest speaker at a recent Rotary luncheon meeting, I introduced the concept of enculturation to the audience. The general reaction was positive and receptive.

It appeared to me that it was more difficult for traditional academics to accept the concept of selflessness and theoretical wisdom; as James mentioned, "*no authority emanates from them (the mystic group) which should make it a duty for those who*

*stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically*" (James, 1901: 381). In a way, it reflected the importance of selflessness that I advocated. The more knowledge or pre-supposition of knowledge or fixed worldview that a person has, the more difficult it is for the person to have *epoché* and to have an open mind to look at any phenomenon objectively or from another angle. People might not reject concepts that are as far from their reach as fiction. However, when such fiction stands lively in front of them, they have difficulty in accepting it.

I echo Maxwell's view that it is a general limitation of science, if science can only study the things that can be objectively tested or proven and neglect the existence of other phenomena that might not be objectively or 'scientifically' proven (Maxwell, 2007).

#### *8.7.4 Small number of participants*

This research covered the narratives of eleven volunteers (including me) of the twenty qualified volunteers who had been serving SBHK for more than twenty years, as at 2011. In terms of a qualitative research, a population of eleven participants is not too small, especially when a book containing their narratives is to be published. Given that the number of qualified volunteers was only about twenty, this research covered more than half of the allowable population. I would say that the number of participants was reasonable in terms of qualitative research.

However, in terms of the level of representation by participants, especially on their personal prerequisites such as their childhood experience, character and influence from different types of parenting, the narratives of eleven volunteers seemed not to be sufficient to make a strong case for a meaningful or reliable representation. No doubt it would be more beneficial to increase the population size to make a more convincing case quantitatively for such personal attributes. It is unfortunate that the number of qualified volunteers was really restricted by the natural turnover rate of volunteers in SBHK. The best that I can do is to convince the rest of the qualified volunteers (ten or more) to permit a quantitative account of about twenty plus volunteers to increase the reliability of this study. After all, even if I could involve the entire twenty qualified volunteers, the total number would still be small if weighted quantitatively.

Perhaps, another study could be conducted with the rest of the long-serving volunteers to complement this work so that views from most of the qualified volunteers would be accounted for. Then, the small number of participants would be a less critical factor for this kind of study, as the limitation would become a natural limit for this organization to be studied. Nevertheless, the consensus by the eleven volunteers on the management style, policy and culture of SBHK to support long-serving volunteers was comparatively more reliable and in alignment with similar literature.

Last but not least, as mentioned in section 3.13.3, two of the eleven volunteers reported peak experiences, which are rare. Such a high rate of occurrence in a small culture, namely in a suicide prevention hotline service, signifies the important relationship between such empathic service culture and the occurrence of mystic or peak experiences.

## **8.8 Impact to SBHK and similar organization – Recommendations**

Given my conclusion above on the retention of long-serving volunteers relating to five areas of discovery, in my roles of practitioner and management member of SBHK, I have the following recommendations to make to support SBHK or similar organization into the future:

In terms of personal attributes:

1. During the intake of volunteers, design an activity such as storytelling that might elicit their experiences of helping and being helped by others.
2. Provide a safe space to explore if they, or others they know, have had suicidal ideation, or if they know others who have taken their own lives; have been themselves or know others who have been in pain and suffering, and how that made them feel; and what helped them to help and what stopped them from helping. This may be something that could be explored in a group of new intakes. Sharing is a powerful way of bonding and helping the individual not to feel isolated in their own thoughts.

3. Experienced volunteers can have post-group individual conversations to explore cases individually to help them both to make the right decision.

However, as I mentioned before, the attributes that could be seen at intake are no way predictive of long service. They are just general guidelines for consideration with regards to the type of training that could be supplied which could include appreciating and building on the knowledge, experience and resilience that people bring with them.

SBHK and its volunteers might have been practising the following recommendations for some time. However, in general, I hope the following will be helpful to committed volunteers, the management of the SBHK or the management of similar types of organisations.

4. Sharing and mutual support among volunteers during the service to reduce the stress of handling clients, especially in a critical service such as suicide prevention;
5. Voluntary extra time by volunteers to the overall service of the organization. Recognition could be given to relevant volunteers to foster such attitudinal commitment;
6. Service-related academic advancement for volunteers/continuous professional development. Offer a subsidy or sponsorship if affordable through fundraising for such development.

For SBHK and similar organizations, it is important to create a volunteer-friendly environment that includes the following key elements (not an exhaustive list):

7. A transparent, open and documented volunteer policy with systems for periodic review. This includes service or office procedures and guidelines;
8. A flexible and autonomous working environment that allows maximum flexibility to volunteers **but not at the cost of the quality of service**. Samples of areas of concern could be rosters, appraisals, training, roles and skillset requirement for different roles;
9. Provision to meet the main physical needs of the volunteers, such as an easily accessible location of work, food and drinks at the centre, and minor works to improve general comfort during the service such as user-friendly telephone or



computer system, choice of headphones for telephone counselling, a comfortable chair and table to work at, a bed for rest, and the provision of Wi-Fi (if not affecting the provision of service);

10. Maintain the good reputation of the service by ensuring good-quality work that is appreciated or acknowledged by society;
11. Improve the reputation of the organization even at international levels, such as by active participation in relevant international events or the publication of research and other types of books and articles at an international level.

Lastly, for volunteer organizations such as a suicide prevention agency where the exercise of empathy is regularly demanded of volunteers, it is important to understand the potential relationship between empathy, selflessness and wisdom. In order to complement the tacit needs for growth and development for the wisdom of life, the following could be introduced to volunteers:

12. Body-awareness exercises for the volunteers, such as meditation, yoga and mindfulness practice;
13. Lectures on wisdom-related knowledge, such as feedback from wise people: philosophy, logotherapy, positive psychology and mindfulness talks as continuing professional development and other topics which long serving volunteers might suggest.

### **8.9 Impact on me as a professional practitioner in SBHK**

As an autoethnographic researcher, this research experience provided me with a valuable opportunity to understand what kind of an organization I was serving and what type of service it was really offering. While the running of SBHK seemed to be natural or automatic, an in-depth study of its policy and people really provided a fruitful comparison with similar voluntary organizations in other parts of the world.

While my initial thought was to find out more about the personal attributes leading to long service, the results of this research surprised me, as any search for such personal attributes twenty or thirty years beforehand is unpromising. Instead, the policy and

management style of the organization should warrant our attention. I now see the naivety of my original research idea.

In addition, it is vital for our Executive Committee (Exco) members to understand how such a volunteer organization should be running in order to support long-service. It is a good reminder for whoever is running the organization to understand how their management decisions affect the long-term running of the organization. At this juncture, I really have to commend Exco members who have run the organization so consistently and effectively as to maintain the key elements for the retention of volunteers. Without their efforts for over half a century, we might not have so many long-serving volunteers working now.

However, the process and the information that I attained during the research really changed me from being an ordinary person (or a person with a bit of knowledge of psychology) to becoming a student of philosophy. In fact, Maslow noticed a similar trend in him (Maslow, 1970). The detailed reading and struggling with notions of wisdom transcendence or psychology of needs has been transformational. I now understand a number of concepts in philosophy and feel confident in applying some of them to my counselling work. This is because philosophy is about the search for meaning, for the secret of good and evil, for ultimate happiness and wisdom. These are not too distant from what suicidal clients are striving to find to raise them from being trapped in depressive and unhappy feelings.

As a director of SBHK, my management style has also changed. A typical example was when the directors were discussing how to tackle the elderly suicide problem. Some prominent views were to urge the younger generation to look after their elderly parents more often to meet their needs. However, my thought was to encourage the detachment of the elderly, from being too preoccupied with their own needs to see their children. They can also find their happiness by loving and understanding the difficulties of their busy children and without the company of them. I believe that the ultimate happiness of human beings is not the satisfaction of personal needs, but love and an understanding of how our loved ones are leading their lives in the modern

society. I consider this to be a major shift in my thoughts. Perhaps this would shed new light on the service in the organization, if such logic is agreed by other directors.

On similar ground, I would offer relevant philosophical concepts to volunteers or concerned parties with the aim of widening their thoughts on how to help people. Another example was that, during my Rotary talk, I used a pictorial metaphor (see Figure 18 below) of people floating in a river to illustrate how people are striving for their livings or suffering from various daily hassles in the materialistic world without recognizing that, rather than to find something to aid their buoyancy (that is, problem solving), they could swim back to the shore to get away from their problems and look for the source of happiness (that is, to be de-enculturated).



**Figure 18 Pictorial metaphor of people floating in a river**

Perhaps it depends on how much my fellow volunteers understand the result of this research. This situation is similar to the situation of how modern philosophers understand what the *poiesis* is that the ancient philosophers mentioned. If they do not believe in any form of *eudaimonia* or the existence of the correct intellectual knowledge for a wise man to attain, it will be difficult for them to understand totally what Socrates or Aristotle were appealing for.

The journey that I experienced in accomplishing this research project was not uneventful, and I do not imagine that my ongoing journey and philosophy of life to be any different. While at the beginning I tried to write a book to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of SBHK, I underestimated the difficulty of such a task. Although I went through the proposal drafting stage smoothly, my preparation for the actual research was inadequate. This led to some false perceptions when I looked at what narrative data I was holding. This, in turn, brought on a depressive mood. Fortunately, I recovered through discussions with my project consultant, who gave me the encouragement to complete the work with the endorsement to write about the peak experience that I encountered in late 2013.

Although I was speedy in writing both the book and this thesis after receiving the green light from my project consultant, my English proved not up to the standard of writing a book. I was lucky to be able to seek help from a retired native English teacher to proofread my book when I noticed how bad my English was! The completion of the thesis again was full of obstacles, as my expectations on what I should write were disparate. Perhaps with the same spirit of perseverance as a Hotline worker, I continued to try my best to accomplish this doctoral task.

Frankly, with my knowledge and confidence of the concept of selflessness, empathy and wisdom and so on, I am ready to continue my advocacy of such issues. Although I have an understanding of the hurdles I would face, I still need to fulfil my promise to the ten volunteers who participated in my research. I will never forget my collaboration with them to publish their stories which was my original intention as a way to celebrate both my organisation and the long serving Samaritan Befriender volunteers who contributed to its success. I hope that my research will contribute in some way to all of us in SBHK, similar volunteer societies and to existing knowledge in the field.

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香港撒瑪利亞防止自殺會 *Since 1960*  
THE SAMARITAN BEFRIENDERS HONG KONG

## **Appendix 1     Hotline volunteer training schedule and syllabus**

### **Phase 1**

(1) Basic Course (5 sessions) (3 hours per session)

Content: Communication and listening,

Paraphrasing

Empathy

Reflection of feeling

Appreciation

Questioning

Summarizing and concluding

Case referral

The path of helping

Flow and timing

(2) Day Camp

Content: Self-understanding and qualifying role-play of learned skills.

### **Phase 2**

(1) Practical Course (5 sessions)

Content: Case analysis and discussion. Role-play

(2) Preparatory Day before Case Supervision

(3) Case Supervision

Content: Individual case supervision

### Phase 3

(1) Welcoming Day

(2) Advance Course 1 (2 sessions) (3 hours per session)

(3) Practice Period (6 months) (2.5 hours per session)

(4) Advance Course 2 (2 sessions) (3 hours per session)

Contents:

Sex case

Mental illness

Emotion counselling

Written response

Micro view on counselling skill

Self-awareness

Self-defence mechanism

## **Appendix 2 Examples of Sub-headings of paragraphs**

Extract from page 55 of the draft book

### **Reflective comparison**

In my secondary school life, I encountered another female schoolmate who had a scar between her eyebrows. The scar was caused by her father during an incident of domestic violence. The schoolmate was very depressed and unhappy all the time. She always hid from other students. I tried many times to pacify her, but was not successful. Her mother was a popular hawker, selling all kinds of snacks but who, unfortunately, later had a stroke and became paralysed. Although I was not in contact with her after school, I heard of the tragic news about them: At the age of 30, this schoolmate was too tired of taking caring of her paralysed mother. She poisoned her to death and then committed suicide by hanging herself. It was a shock to me to learn about this, but it further enhances my idea that I am a fortunate person in comparison with many other people in society. I am highly satisfied with my past and present life.

### **My mother saved me from the loophole of learned helplessness**

Although I am mentally healthy, my childhood was not uneventful. My mother was an adopted daughter. I am the eldest of my siblings. However, being a female and having similar treatment as my mother, I did not receive very good attention from my grandmother who lived with us. My grandmother only treated the men and boys well. Fortunately, given this maltreatment from my grandmother, my mother was very much aware of the consequences of such behaviour. Without falling into the trap of any typical learned helplessness of a female in a masculine society and becoming depressed, she decided to treat her own children better. As a result, she gave us plenty of freedom. I was free to do many things during my childhood. I could play in the street. I had my own friends, and enjoyed very good relationships with my younger sisters and brothers.

### **Witnessing how my father strived for business**

Since the home environment was not appropriate for the whole family to live together, when I was six I moved out to stay with my father until I was twelve. That move left only my mother and my other siblings to live with our grandparents. I witnessed how my father tried to run a number of catering-related businesses but in vain. He opened a bakery and cake shop to sell bread and moon cakes. He set up company to provide an outreach banquet service. My father was not a good businessman and it ended with the collapse of all his businesses.

### **Stay in SBHK for friendship, client and pacing with the society**

Despite my independent character, I attribute three reasons for my staying such a long time in SBHK. These are friendship, clients, and keeping pace and being updated in the latest changes of the society.

## Appendix 3 Selection of Topics for Triangulation

Selection of Topics for Triangulation																
		Jason	Han	Tooyoung	Polly	Joyce	Bonnie	LAU	Robert	Cheung	Stephen	Vincent	No. Of Occurrence	literature	Triangulation	
Related experience	Past Reasons															
	try new area							1				1	2		2	
	self help experience							1					1		1	
	known interest in counselling									1	1		2		2	
	emotional experience														0	
	in touch with suicide case					1	1						2		2	
	special childhood experience										1	1	2		2	
Organizational	difficult to join SBHK							1					1		0	
	Good Experience in Comms							1					1		1	
Environmental	Convenient location/time	1					1					1	3	1	4	
	Childhood - independent authoritative			1			1	1	1				4		0	
Childhood	experience with social worker									1	1		3		4	
	influenced by teacher										1		1		3	
Significant Other	suggested by friend		1	1	1					1			4		1	
	sibling order 3														1	
Sibling Order	Present Reason										1		1		0	
	Personal														0	
character	helping attitude	1	1	1	1		1		1	1			7		7	
	try new counselling skill			1		1		1					3		3	
	training/sharing experience		1		1	1	1	1	1		1		7		7	
	like influence other through conversation			1	1	1	1			1			5		5	
	acceptance character						1			1	1		3		3	
	unconditional love character				1						1		4		4	
	Christianity			1	1					1	1		5		5	
	Buddhism		1			1			1			1	4		4	
Motive	self oriented		1	1			1	1	1	1			6	1	7	
	other oriented		1	1	1	1	1	1		1			7	1	8	
environmental	no environmental blockage							1					1		0	
	Experience in EXCO					1			1		1		3		1	
	influenced by other volunteers		1								1	1	3	1	4	
	pacing with society						1						1		1	
Growth/development	help personal development	1			1		1	1	1		1		6		0	
	help build interpersonal relationship	1			1		1	1			1		5	1	6	
	add value for self	1			1		1	1					4		4	
	continuous reflection		1		1		1				1	1	5		5	
Internal matching	congruent to life						1		1				3		0	
	ability to let go client's story							1					1		3	
External	appreciation by client							1					1		1	
	Reinforcement by successful cases										1		1		1	
Organizational	nature of service (challenge)	1		1	1			1	1			1	6	1	0	
	nature of service (suicide prevention)			1				1				1	3		7	
	meaningful job			1	1			1		1	1		5	1	3	
	Capacity for volunteer to try new approach					1						1	4	1	6	
	Warm circle of friend/Group bonding	1		1	1		1		1	1	1	1	8	1	5	
	overcome difficulties by peer			1	1		1		1				5	1	9	
	need to support new volunteer		1		1		1				1		4		6	
	opportunity to learn other things	1					1	1				1	4	1	4	
	Independent working environment	1										1	2		5	
	autonomy, flexibility	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	9	1	2	
Devotion to client	academic improvement					1	1		1		1	1	5	1	0	
	desire to stay	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1		9		6	
societal	society														9	
	Needs in the society								1				1		0	
Desire for growth	Future Reason														0	
	know that it helps personal development							1			1	1	3		3	
	keep brain runs fast							1					1		1	
	stay calm under stress	1	1										2		2	
other roles in hotline	Group leader/Exco	1	1	1		1			1		1	1	7		7	
societal	more people benefit							1			1		2		0	
	contribute to Better society							1			1		2		2	
Pleasant life	being proud			1							1		2	1	0	
other	habitual service/like family	1						1				1	3		3	
	set volunteer sample			1									1		1	

Wisdom	<b>Knowledge</b>												0	
	Can learn from any means										1		1	
	continue add value for self										1		2	
	continue learning										1	1	3	
	Following commitment											1	2	
	Follow natural order										1	2	6	
	<b>Reflection</b>												0	
	need to self help										1		2	
	continuous reflection										1	1	4	
	reflexivity/intropection											1	2	
	never give up/human resilience is amazing										1		2	
	reflect on counseling skill											1	3	
	self awareness											1	3	
	importance to let go										1		2	
	live present moment										1		3	
	Live is not controllable										1		3	
	Helping other helps self										1	1	6	
	<b>Affection</b>												0	
	understand trend, wish to assist										1	1	4	
	transcendence											1	2	
	difficulty to face shame											1	1	
	internalize listening skill										1		1	
	virtues												0	
	resilience and perseverance										1	1	8	
	gratitude										1	1	2	
	authenticity										1	1	4	
	curiosity/openmindedness										1	1	4	
	self sufficiency										1	1	2	
	compassionate										1		2	
	Peak experience											1	3	
	overcome suffering											1	2	
	Selfless behaviour										1	1	7	
	importance of empathy										1	1	2	
	other consideration for leaving	<b>Organizational</b>												0
		too many new rules											1	1
		too much professional at work											1	1
		change service target										1	1	2
														0

## Appendix 4 Participant information sheet

各位義工朋友，

您好， 這個電郵只發給在撒記有超過廿年義工經驗的朋友。• 可能有一部份人士我曾經在不同場合撞見時 傾談過。• 我正在修讀一個博士課程而我研究的課題是 The Attributes of the Long-serving Samaritans Befrienders in Hong Kong. 我希望透過這個研究去詳細了解是什麼令到義工可以服務撒記這麼長久。• 在發展本人的學歷同時 希望協助撒記發展。• 了解如何培養更多資深義工。

經過一年多與大學的功課交往和策劃，我的研究計劃已得到大學的批准。• 計劃中，今次研究的結果及收集得到資料期望是可以以書本型式出版，進一步宣傳撒記的義工服務。• 我現在正準備進入向十多位資深義工收集資料的階段。• 所以特別發出此電郵通告各位。• 期望大家能夠協助。• 各位的協助主要是接受面談講述自己對研究課題的體會和義工經歷及填寫問卷。• 我會再用電話解釋有關需要及約見各下。

如有任何疑問亦可致電 98870416 直接與本人聯絡。

0651 簡柏基上

Dear Volunteers,

Good day to you. This email is only sent to those SBHK Hotline volunteers with over 20 years or more experience. Perhaps I might have discussed with some of you that I am embarking on a Doctoral Degree course and my research title is 'The Attributes of the Long-serving Samaritans Befrienders in Hong Kong'. I wish to understand what factors had contributed to the long service of our volunteers. This could help SBHK to understand how to breed long service volunteers and at the same time enrich my academic development.

After yea long discussion and planning with my University, my research plan was approved. Under the plan, the result of the research and data collected would be published in the form of a book to promote SBHK voluntary service. Now, I am ready to gather data from about 10 volunteers. This email serves to inform our potential volunteers. I wish that you can assist by accepting my request for interview to sharing your volunteer experience and insight on this topic as well as answering a

questionnaire. I will contact you by phone to explain further detail and secure further interview appointment date.

If you have any question, please feel free to contact me at 98870416.

0651/Vincent Kan



## **Appendix 5     Consent form**

A study on 'The Attributes of Long-serving Samaritan Befrienders of Hong Kong'

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby agree to undertake the interview conducted by the researcher (Mr Kan Pak Kei) for the captioned research study. I understand that Mr Kan will publish the result of his research in two documents, namely a 'Critical Commentary' and a draft book. Both documents would be submitted to the Middlesex University for academic assessment purpose. However, the researcher would pursue for the publication of the book. I, therefore, give my consensus for Mr Kan to publish the information I provide during his research in the captioned two documents.

For the publication of the book, I specifically request my name to be mentioned as \_\_\_\_\_ in English, and \_\_\_\_\_, in Chinese, if a publication in Chinese is to be prepared

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Attachment



# Towards Wisdom

Stories of Long-serving Samaritan Befriender volunteers in Hong Kong

This book is part of the submission by Pak Kei Vincent Kan

S/N M00193313, for the Doctor of Professional Studies  
Researching

*The Attributes of Long-Serving Counselling Volunteers in the  
Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong*

Chapters 1 to 11 are collectively referred as Chapter 5: Data of the  
Critical Commentary, submitted together on 6 Jun 2017

Pak Kei Vincent Kan

Recently, I received a telephone call at three in the morning from a lady who told me that she was determined to commit suicide, but was curious to know what I would say about it. I replied with all the arguments against this resolution and for survival, and I talked to her for thirty minutes – until she finally gave her word that she would not take her life, but rather come to see me in the hospital. But when she visited me there, it turned out that not one of all the arguments I offered had impressed her. The only reason she had decided not to commit suicide was the fact that, rather than growing angry because of having been disturbed in my sleep in the middle of the night, I had patiently listened to her and talked with her for half an hour, and a world – she found – in which this can happen, must be a world worth living in.

(Viktor E. Frankl, 1988. Preface)

## Acknowledgements

There are many people whom I wish to thank for contributing to the publication of this book: The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) and its executive committee members for allowing me to carry out the research and publish the book; and the ten long-serving volunteers who generously permitted me to record, write for them, present autoethnographically their first-person narratives and publish their life stories to commemorate the remarkable history of SBHK over the past century.

I should like to thank my wife, May, and my children, Odilia and Andrew, for their continuous support over the years of my voluntary work. Without their cooperation, I would not have been able to commit my spare time wholeheartedly to volunteering. There are many colleagues and friends of mine who continue to contribute to my knowledge and experience, to name a few, Dr Gondoli, who introduced me to Viktor Frankl's *logotherapy* and positive psychology; Wacy Lui, a clinical psychologist, who gave me insights into mindfulness; and Bryn Williamson, a retired English teacher of my alma mater, St Louis School, who helped me a great deal with the proofreading. Last but not least, Jason Tam, one of our volunteers, helped me considerably by writing the Chinese transcript of the interviews. Their contributions enrich my life and my practice.

## Preface

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) was established in 1960. It was the first of its kind: a suicide prevention hotline service in Asia. In 2010, being one of the Hotline volunteers and having served for more than 27 years, I started to think about writing this book. My intention was to research the longevity of some of the long-serving volunteers of the SBHK and to record properly the stories of how they became the pillars of this non-governmental organization for half a century, and to provide a reference to similar organizations on how long-serving counselling volunteers can be chosen and nourished.

Over the years, the Hotline centre of SBHK did produce some publications of its own. They were annual reports or publications appealing to citizens to encourage them in challenging deeply negative emotions, and an information handbook guiding the Form 5 graduates (i.e. GCE 'O' Level) on further studies and career choices immediately before and after announcement of the Hong Kong School Certificate Examination results. The information handbook was part of the special summer hotline service. In addition, there were two series of very small booklets (沒有白過的日子) in Chinese, containing some stories of our volunteers and some celebrities in Hong Kong. The booklets recorded how they lived their lives productively. However, until now there has been no publication about the lives of the volunteers told by them. Neither is there any public any comparable publication in any other country on this topic. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the SBHK, I began to think about writing a book dedicated to our volunteers.

The volunteers of the SBHK, as with volunteers in other parts of the world, were recruited from all walks of life. We are ordinary people who are compassionate, wishing to help people on the verge of suicide or people with suicidal tendencies. In fact, none of the eleven volunteers mentioned in the book are professional social workers, psychiatrists or counsellors. We began our service by learning on the job and by having empathy. Most of us were lacking confidence in carrying out the service at the beginning. However, we found our own ways to enrich our knowledge and skill in the counselling field in order to support our clients, whose issues have changed over time. We have had to keep up with the shifting influences of modern society on beliefs, in hope for the future and the increased coping mechanisms that many people turn to today that were not available in the past. One coping mechanism that seems to be more prevalent in the face of increased hopelessness is suicide, when an individual comes to believe that the best way of coping with life is to exit from it.

The regular exposure of volunteers to such critical situations and deeply traumatic stories has affected our lives in different ways. In this book, the eleven volunteers present their own stories of what has motivated and sustained them while serving the SBHK.

The individual stories and our shared values have enriched our lives individually and as a group. This contributes to what defines us and the organization, and what helps us to go on reflecting on our practice, as every person who contacts us in distress is also

contributing to our knowledge and understanding, and we honour that, too. Listening to our clients and to my colleagues has helped me to hear my own voice more clearly. I have come to see the implicit and explicit reflection that goes on as we do our work as a form of resilience against trauma and despair when regularly working with people who are suicidal. It challenges one's own ideas about the meaning of existence.

I wish to add that this book is part of thesis of my doctoral research project, which emerged from my personal and professional experience of volunteering as a suicide hotline worker. The study took an autoethnographic approach to examine the narratives of ten other volunteers alongside my own life-transcending experience.

The layout of this book is simple. It begins with an introduction to myself, Vincent Kan, the author, and a brief account of the history and recent development of SBHK. Chapters 1 to 11 are presented in an expressionistic, narrative format, focusing on the volunteers' internal feelings, emotions and thoughts. They present their personal or cultural experience from a thoroughly subjective perspective.

My own story (Chapter 11) is also in narrative format. However, I provide a number of citations to support my view in the latter part of the chapter. The citations are not a parade of erudition but are due to my own personality, which required more solid academic theories or references to assist me in conveying my message or to reinforce what I wish to say. It is a conceptualistic approach using my story as a mechanism for conveying and critiquing culture experiences. I wish this highly reflexive content to provide another level of insight for the readers. I have to emphasize that I am not teaching through my narrative, but wish to share my thoughts with readers according to my own character. I think that this sharing is of particular importance to my fellow volunteers in SBHK. It is because we have undergone similar training, practice and experience. Much of the knowledge that we have acquired is in common, but there is still other knowledge that we might have encountered due to our individual experience. The sharing of such personal knowledge, which I think is a relevant component to foster my current state of mind, is inevitably necessary.

The final chapter, Chapter 12, presents the conclusion of the research with cross-reference to the narratives and other literature findings. I have to admit that this last chapter is more academic in nature. However, I feel that it would assist interested individual readers to pursue a similar journey to verify the advocacy of this book with their own lives. It could also help other volunteer organizations to find references and solutions for volunteer retention management.

I hope that you will enjoy reading this book, mainly for the narratives of true life stories of the Samaritan Befrienders volunteers, yet changing in style to a slightly more academic writing towards the end.



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## Who is Vincent Kan? (by the author)

I was born in Hong Kong on the second day of 1961, which is not too difficult to remember. Chronologically, I am the sixth of a family of seven members: parents, one elder brother, two elder sisters and a younger sister. From kindergarten to tertiary education, I studied in Hong Kong. I was not admitted to university immediately after my matriculation course, as the competition for such places in the 1980s was intense. My academic results did not allow me entry to any university at that time.

At the age of twenty, when I left school, I started to work with a ground handling company, Jardine Airport Services Limited, at the old Kai Tak Airport. This marked the beginning of my aviation career. I joined the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong as a Hotline volunteer in 1983 as I was not able to find any part-time work, as I thought at the time. However, deeper reflection revealed my reasons for my joining SBHK at that time, as may be found in Chapter 11. I never thought as a young man that I would continue until this day without a break in service. At present, apart from my role as a frontline hotline volunteer, I have served as a member of the executive committee of SBHK for the past decade. In 1988, I joined another voluntary service, the then Royal Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force, as a voluntary traffic controller. I provided air traffic information services to local light aircraft flying in the Hong Kong Territories. I am still a serving member. It was renamed the Government Flying Service in 1993, in preparation for the change of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997.

I married in 1990 and had two children. In 1991, I took the part-time LLB course at the University of London through the extramural division of Hong Kong University. I graduated in 1995 after studying law for four years. In January 1997, I left the company that I had served for fifteen years and joined the Civil Aviation Department of the Hong Kong Government. My aviation career continued in parallel with my voluntary service. In 2007, together with ten Hotline volunteers, I joined the first Master's Degree of Art in Work Based Learning (Counselling Studies) course and obtained my Master's degree in 2009. It was during this Masters course that I realized my interest in counselling and human growth. I started to read intensely, tracking the relevant literature through references and bibliographies in order to understand more about what the source writers were advocating in various subject areas. 'Love to learn' suddenly became one of the top five character strengths of me.

Although I finished the Master's degree course in 2009, my reading habits did not change. Perhaps for this reason, I started to think about further academic advancement. Since 2010 was the fiftieth anniversary of SBHK, I suddenly thought of carrying out a piece of insider research on the reasons for the longevity of the long-serving Samaritan Befrienders to commemorate this anniversary. Perhaps I was also thinking about how this might reveal why I had stayed there for so long. As I had joined the executive committee of SBHK in 1995, first as the secretary and later in 1999 as vice-chairman up to now (2014), I thought more on how to sustain the service of this volunteer-oriented NGO and its good customs and practice. I started to see such research as a way to increase exposure for its good work and undertaking a doctoral degree as helping me to develop an appropriate research methodology. It has done so much more than that.

Interestingly, I did not receive any formal training in psychology or in Maslow's theories, which came to inform much of my thinking and helped me to position my own experiences and those of others. I only read about who he was and what he did. His work resonated deeply with working at the existential edge of life. The importance of meaning-making was reframed for me in the work of the holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl. It was, in a sense, like meeting people from my planet, allowing me to be more courageous and explicit about my humanistic, existential and phenomenological notions of reality and truth. They helped me to articulate what I had not been able to understand about myself, my colleagues, the work that we do and why, in an environment of fast-moving economic change and its impact on science, values, notions of truth, existential meanings and ways of being. Many of the people whom we talk to on the Hotline speak of meaninglessness, seeing the world through a different lens from the one that is now culturally dominant, of not wanting to be a part of it because it would mean not fully living, or contributing something that is no longer valued. I hope that this book will be some small contribution to keeping a window open on life through listening to the voices of those who help such people every day, both in Hong Kong and across the world.

## Introduction

### about volunteering with the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong

The Samaritans is an organization that was set up in the United Kingdom in 1953 by a priest, Chad Varah, who dedicated his life to serving people with suicidal ideation. Through conversational support, it provided a service to prevent people from committing suicide (Varah, 1973). Setting up the first Samaritans in the United Kingdom was triggered by news reports of three suicide cases in Greater London on a summer's day in 1953. Varah was impulsive and began to offer his personal help by making it known to the press on 2 November 1953 that people contemplating suicide were invited to telephone him at MANsion\* House 9000. His service was later assisted by some other kind-hearted lay people. He then discovered the importance of a befriending service that could complement other professional counselling or psychiatric treatments (ibid.) (\* this is not a typographical error).

His service started to attract attention from different places within and beyond the United Kingdom. Starting in early 1954, he received many inquiries from Greece, Switzerland, West Germany and Denmark –even Havana in Cuba – about the service. Very soon, the Samaritans' hotline services were spreading into different parts of the world (ibid.).

### **The first four decades of Samaritans in Hong Kong**

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) was established in 1960 under the name 'Suicide Prevention Society'. It was registered as a society in Hong Kong in 1963, and was subsequently renamed 'The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong' (SBHK, 2013). It was established by Mr Andrew Tu and Mrs Elsie Hume Elliott Tu. They organized a group of volunteers who were mainly primary school teachers of the then Mu Kuang English School. It was not clear what motivated Mr Tu to establish the service, but he believed in it enough to set up the service at his own home before a centre at Lo Foo Nam Public Estate was granted to the service. Despite the small establishment, it was the first suicide prevention telephone hotline service not only in Hong Kong but in all Asia. It provided around-the-clock telephone emotional support to clients who were in emotional distress or having suicidal thoughts. The service was carried out entirely by interested volunteers.

Due to a major increase in student suicides as a result of the setbacks in the Hong Kong Certificate Examination (HKCEE) in 1964, in 1965 SBHK launched a summer hotline service for secondary school graduates. To counteract the seriousness of perceived failure and the cultural shame accompanying a fear of academic failure, volunteers reported for extra duty to provide a top-up twenty-four hour service for the days immediately before and after the announcement of the results of the HKCEE. More than ten extra telephone lines were provided to cope with the influx of calls from desperate graduates. In parallel with the extra hotline, a group of volunteers formed a team to collect information from schools and published a special handbook for graduates. This handbook contained the latest information on the average school acceptance criteria in order to provide an easy reference for them. By knowing the acceptance criteria for various schools, graduates could easily understand what kinds of places they could apply to.

Alternatively, they were encouraged to seek other options such as joining vocational training schools or seeking non-academic study, such as art. Basically, the handbook provided a brief for the graduates to understand their choices, based on their examination results. It also reduced their stress and panic levels when they felt lost after receiving their examination result. This service was highly appreciated by the youth of that generation.

Some volunteers even called up major enterprises across Hong Kong and asked if they could offer any jobs to graduates. It was reported that, on one occasion, they were successful in lining up ten posts at Jardine Matheson & Company. The volunteers put up posters in the street on the night before the announcement of the school certificate examination results, promoting the service and offering job opportunities to the graduates later, if necessary. The extra telephone hotline and the handbook service were maintained for thirty-five years until 2000, when this pioneering work prompted the other organizations to offer similar services. The service helped students to make their choices at a crossroads in their life, instead of them feeling trapped in a cul-de-sac with no way out apart from death.

In the 1970s, SBHK offered its services as two distinct units: one in Chinese and one in English. The English service unit was once run separately from a hut on Princess Margaret's Road, and then moved to Wanchai. The Chinese service remained in Lo Foo Nam Public Estate (later renamed Lok Fu Estate). SBHK was a member of Befrienders International (Samaritans Worldwide) until 1982, when the English service was unlinked from SBHK. In most of the annual reports of SBHK before 1982, the twenty principles of Samaritan Befrienders were published (SBHK 1971–1975) (see Appendix). Some of the principles remain as tacit rules of the present SBHK. Mr and Mrs Tu continued the English service by establishing another organization named 'The Samaritans', which became 'The Samaritans, Multilingual Service' of today.

SBHK shifted its telephone hotline centre several times. In 1985, it moved from the Lok Fu Estate to Shun Lee Estate. In 1996, it used an additional centre in Choi Hung Estate, where the telephone service was relocated. Shun Lee Center then became the training centre for volunteers. In 2001, SBHK expanded its scope of service using the Shun Lee centre as the initial office for two new services (namely the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre and the Life Education Centre) until the renovation of a new office in Pat Tin Estate gave them accommodation in 2002. In July 2014, with the demolition of the old Pat Tin Estate, the centre moved to a location a five-minute walk away.

In 1994, like many other NGOs, SBHK was incorporated as a limited company in preparation for the change of sovereignty in 1997, when Hong Kong would cease to be a British colony and return to the People's Republic of China as a Special Administrative Region. Since all volunteer members of SBHK were shareholders of SBHK, the change of status to a limited company would limit the liability of volunteers and protect them from unnecessary loss in the event of any unforeseeable adverse circumstances in running the NGO.

SBHK is a local voluntary organization that is run by volunteer workers. Though non-religious in nature, it reflects the generosity and benevolence of the Good Samaritan in the Bible who gave

a helping hand to the distressed and helpless. Through giving support and rendering emotional counselling to them, it helps those in need to help themselves (SBHK, 2013).

### **Spirit**

The spirit of SBHK is to bring out benevolence in human nature and, with love, patience and compassion, to nurture the spirit of mutual aid, mutual support and mutual affection (ibid.).

### **Mission**

SBHK has three missions:

1. To befriend, on humanitarian grounds, people who are facing difficulties or are lonely and depressed, by helping them to regain confidence in life;
2. To publicize and promote the spirit of their service in the community through talks, seminars, research and other means; and
3. To set up organizations with a similar nature and mission to help in South East Asia and neighbouring areas (ibid.).

Although SBHK is not a member of the Befrienders Worldwide whose vision is to contribute to a society where suicide is understood both locally and globally, leading to fewer deaths by suicide, SBHK serves in a similar way. It supports local clients to help to set up and provide training or sharing with their counterparts in neighbouring areas such as Macau and Mainland China.

Similar to the Befrienders Worldwide, whose mission is to be a principal resource in emotional support and to share research which can lead to innovative service practices delivered by volunteers, for over half a century SBHK has committed its service to emotional support by both volunteers and professional social workers. This is thanks to the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which shares this vision with SBHK and has allocated significant resources to allow this volunteer organization to run the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) with professional social workers. This is unique in Hong Kong, and comes in for special attention from the government in tackling the problem of suicide. To my knowledge, few countries can afford similar recurrent resources of over USD1.3M per year for such a service, for a population of 7 million people.

Due to limited resources for research, SBHK has not committed a great proportion of its efforts to research into volunteers' practice. From time to time, it has published books by volunteers, sharing their life stories and trying to advocate the importance of a positive lifestyle to readers. Suicide is different from many other social problems and arises from trigger events such as traumatic experience or observable symptoms such as drug addiction, mental or physical health challenges, and self-harming behaviours. Suicidal clients are not always easily identifiable. People who, on the surface, look successful and without a care in the world, can be at high risk, while many who have serious problems in their lives, for example redundancy, caring for relatives with little support and loss of their children, are at low risk. A range of health statistics can be seen to point to a high risk of depression or attempting suicide. However, it is still not easy to identify such people in order to offer preventative intervention. We often have to wait for them to call us.

It is even more difficult to identify the impulsive suicidal person, as their suicidal thoughts may be triggered by some sudden life event such as the break-up of a relationship or marriage, or a sudden disappointment disrupting their career. That people do not have any idea of committing suicide at one moment does not mean that they will not have such thoughts at the next moment. Once the thoughts start to take on the possibility of a rational way out of the dilemma or pressure, it is like a release. They may suddenly act on them, with tragic consequences for themselves, their families and friends and, of course, others, for whom reading about such a suicide can act as the trigger for thoughts in them, too.

Despite the environmental difficulties which SBHK has faced over the years in identifying possible suicide risks, its volunteers have built up a reputable hotline service using their experience. They have developed their own selection and training requirements for volunteers. Within the limitations of a telephone hotline with clients with emotional or suicidal problems to support them at that critical time, patience, a non-judgmental attitude and empathic listening skills are all essential attributes of the good befriender. These are based on the attributes identified by Carl Rogers, the American psychologist, one of the founders of humanistic psychology. Through his observations, he directed practitioners away from a purely scientific/medical approach to a person-centred one in working with vulnerable people. He wanted neither to psychologize nor to diagnose them. He wanted practitioners to be 'human' in their interactions with vulnerable people and had shown in his own practice how effective such a person-centred approach could be. Stability in emotion and overall maturity of the volunteers appear to be key factors in their sustained and sustaining presence in the service.

Similar to other hotline services, nuisance or sex callers are inevitable. These are an added pressure on volunteers, who are there to support people with suicidal tendencies. Female volunteers are understandably targeted more often in this way, and the development of resilience over time, the support of experienced colleagues and relevant training are essential components.

### **Significant developments after 2001**

The usual twenty-four hour hotline service of SBHK and its forerunner, the summer hotline service, became well known to the citizens of Hong Kong in terms of suicide prevention work during the past four decades. However, the volunteers of SBHK came to believe that it would be of help if the service were extended, so that they could reach out to clients for longer periods in the form of crisis counselling, on the one hand, and suicide prevention community education, on the other.

In 1994, SBHK established a Caring Fund for the purpose of financing a project, 'Starting a Caring World with Listening'. The project aimed to arouse awareness of the importance of listening and a passion for life. Through the fund, SBHK expanded its community work at a professional education level and, in February 2006, it launched the first professional certificate programme in Counseling and Suicide Prevention. The objective of the programme is to equip participants with knowledge and skills in counselling and suicide prevention, in order to help



and support those who are in emotional and psychological crisis, so as to prevent suicide from as early as possible. In 2014, SBHK ran the twenty-fifth course. Although the course is run by volunteers, it is recognized by most organizations, such as schools, the police and hospital authorities, as one of the curricula for continuing professional development.

Following the financial turmoil of 1997, there was a downturn in the economy and growing pressure for suicide intervention. There were several shocking reports of mothers committing suicide with their young children, and this stirred up emotions in our communities and across our society. SBHK was aware that, on its own, the Hotline service might not be fully able to satisfy the growing need.

There were then two major developments for SBHK. With the active support of the Social Welfare Department (SWD) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSARG) and the subsidy granted by the Lotteries Fund, in March 2002 SBHK embarked on a project for a new Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC). This was a three-year pilot scheme for the purpose of providing a more comprehensive suicide intervention service run by trained social workers for the community. With three years of proven contribution to filling a service gap in society, in May 2005 SCIC became a subvention service under the SWD. This allowed the SCIC to receive regular funding from the HKSARG to continue its service to the present day (SBHK, 2014).

In parallel with the development of SCIC, SBHK considered the need to promote life education at an earlier stage, together with community support to fight the adverse effects of the economic downturn. In 2002, SBHK successfully secured funding from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust (HKJC) for a three-year pilot scheme to establish a Life Education Centre (LEC). Upon completion of the pilot project, the LEC continued to receive support from the HKJC to carry out its mission as a suicide prevention education project. At present, the LEC mainly focuses on delivering talks to schoolchildren on cherishing life and facing adversity. The LEC also trains life ambassadors, who are the volunteers who assist SBHK in promoting suicide prevention in areas other than the Hotline service. They organize community education activities, visit the underprivileged and provide aftercare to various clients of SCIC who have completed their treatment with its social workers.

In view of the change in the global culture on communication with the internet, SBHK developed a service known as 'Suicide Prevention On internet' (SPOT) in 2008. This is a collaboration between the volunteers of the Hotline and the (LEC) to search for keywords regarding suicidal ideation, such as 'suicide', 'being very depressed', 'wanting to die', 'wanting to sleep forever', 'no point in living' and similar negative wordings on internet blogs, Facebook or QQ (a web-based discussion forum in Mainland China), to try to locate the people who wrote them. After identifying the writers, the SPOT volunteers try to engage in dialogue with them in a direction to encourage them to seek help. In 2013, the SPOT team found over 144,000 related blogs and cumulatively referred 290 internet users to the Hotline for follow-up action (SBHK, 2014).

Another service provided by SBHK on the internet is 'help4suicide'. This is a website ([www.help4suicide.org.hk](http://www.help4suicide.org.hk)) with a number of articles and videos on the negative effect of suicide. SBHK believes that, when considering suicide, a large number of people will search the internet for information, such as the best way to do so or the meaning of life. While most websites are negative in nature or else promote merely the most comfortable means of committing suicide, 'help4suicide' provides a platform for such internet users to obtain more positive information at a time when they are considering whether to commit suicide or not. Again, it provides a means for direct communication with the social workers of SCIC.

In 2004, SCIC developed a support group in Hong Kong for suicide survivors, later renamed the 'Live out the Rainbow' group. In May 2014, the Rainbow group had already assembled over 135 survivors who had close relatives or friends who had committed suicide. The survivors receive individual and group therapy at SCIC to overcome this traumatic experience. They have become another group of effective volunteers in SBHK who, in their role as fellow survivors, visit and befriend new survivors to provide emotional support and consolation for those with similar problems (SBHK, 2014).

### **Role of Hotline volunteers**

In its operation of the twenty-four hour Hotline, SBHK uses exclusively volunteers to listen to calls. In the 1960s, all volunteers were teachers at Mu Kuang English School. According to one of the most senior members of SBHK, initially there was no intention to recruit more volunteers, as the organization did not have the funds even to set up recruit training. However, one of the staff, 'Uncle Chao', volunteered to suspend his salary in order to allow the management to reallocate funding to commence a recruitment strategy. Initially, three training classes were set up in 1965 for the public to join SBHK. It was only after the 1970s that SBHK started to recruit volunteers more regularly. In fact, few people staffed the Hotline; in the 1980s, it only had one centre-in-charge role plus 'Uncle Chao', who became the resident watchman at the centre. The centre-in-charge could be a social worker or from another discipline, and the role was to carry out administrative work to support the volunteers.

For the past half century, Hotline volunteers have been the body and soul of SBHK. They receive in-house training that is organized by more experienced volunteers. At the frontline, volunteers man the suicide prevention telephone hotline continuously. They offer their care and concern, and listen to desperate people calling from all walks of life. They apply what they have learned in the in-house training to respond to clients. They try to help people to vent their grievance, anger, sadness and hopelessness that are caused by different situations. They wish only for these clients to recover from their suicidal ideation and regain the energy to carry on with their lives.

In order to maintain a consistency in the service, experienced volunteers act as tutors or mentors for the new volunteers. Volunteers are taught active listening skills and how to demonstrate empathy towards clients. Volunteers elect from among themselves executive committee members (or directors, under Company Ordinance) to form the executive committee (Exco) to monitor the overall functioning and development of the SBHK.

Before 2002, Exco generally consisted of a chairman, vice-chairman (optional), treasurer, secretary and committee members. These roles undertook training, membership, public relations, publishing and recreational activities. Since the establishment of two new centres, the SCIC and Life Education Center (LEC), in 2002 and the progressive increase in the number of full-time staff on the Hotline, various new posts have been introduced from time to time for committee members to supervise each individual centre. However, nearly all the roles in relation to the Hotline service, such as committee members for recreational activities, training and membership, have been merged into the post of committee member.

In the past, the majority of the Hotline's day-to-day activities were managed by Exco. These included case screening and supervision, recruitment and training for new volunteers, publications such as the annual report and the handbook for the secondary school graduates, handling complaints, organising gatherings for volunteers, developing policy and acting as a media spokesperson. With the advent of the new centres, which are comprised mainly of social workers, the voluntary committee member role became the supervisor for the centre-in-charge role and thus indirectly responsible for the running of each centre and its staff. As of May 2014, SBHK has thirty-three full-time staff. These are mainly social workers, programme workers, public relations officers and administrators.

### **Recruitment and training for Hotline volunteers**

According to Jason (Chiu Kor), the interviewee in Chapter 1 of this book and the most senior serving member, in the early days he was unaware of any special criteria for the selection of volunteers. The Hotline did not run as systematically as at present. Volunteers basically reported for duty when they could. Their training sessions were mostly talks by lawyers, doctors or other professionals on special topics such as the legal procedure for divorce or handling mental illness. There might be visits to some special organizations such as police stations or social welfare agencies.

Between the 1970s and the 1980s, the prototype for recruitment and training was developed. In the mid-1980s, applicants needed to undertake a written test and attend a face-to-face interview with experienced volunteers. Successful applicants were allowed to take a training course of 30 hours and had to attend for ten consecutive weeks. The course included lectures on empathy, counselling and active listening skills, as well as, more importantly, role-play with trainees. After the training course and a qualifying practical test, the volunteers were selected and appointed.

The committee member responsible for training has continued to review and modify the training policy over the years. A snapshot in 2012 indicated that the format of training has been further modified. A group intake interview has replaced the individual interviews. The training course is now separated into two halves. The first consists of an initial five sessions and a day camp. At the end of the day camp, trainees need to take the qualifying practical test. Only trainees who pass the test are selected for the second half of the course. The syllabus of this second half focuses on special handling skills for suicidal callers, manipulative clients or

nuisance sex callers.

After completing the course, volunteers are allowed to take live calls under the supervision of experienced volunteers. In the event that the experienced volunteer finds that the trainee is not suitable to become a Hotline volunteer, they terminate the trainee membership immediately. Hence, on average, the process of training, from intake interview to final qualification, ranges from nine to twelve months.

### **Commitment of volunteers**

Although early volunteers could report for duty when they were available and there was no appraisal system, in general they served the community wholeheartedly. They contributed as much spare time as they could.

In the 1980s, an appraisal system was developed. Volunteers were required to attend for forty weeks a year. In each week, they needed to report for duty for two hours. Unmarried male volunteers had to undertake one Over Night Duty (OND) per month, while female volunteers and married men were exempt. However, due to the need for more people-hours coverage for the service, in the mid-1990s the two-hour per session rule was modified to become the two-and-a-half hour rule. This was a resolution after an extensive debate at the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Exemption from OND was cancelled for those joining after 1996. There was a further modification of the OND requirement as time went on, with the establishment of an OND team. In 2013, the general OND requirement was reduced to two shifts per year for non-OND team members.

Earlier, due to the sensitive nature of the service and to protect them from embarrassment in certain circumstances, volunteers were recommended not to disclose their Hotline volunteer identity to anyone, apart from close family members. However, this non-disclosure rule has been gradually relaxed, as disclosure by volunteers is a chance to promote SBHK's voluntary work in public and in media interviews; furthermore, disclosure of their identity as Hotline volunteers has been changed to something that is controlled by the volunteers themselves. Nevertheless, disclosure for personal, commercial or marketing purposes is still forbidden.

Another issue is case commitment. Since the early 1980s, volunteers needed to listen to at least forty cases during a one-year assessment period. The system has now been changed to obtaining a score of forty points per year, where a point represents a general two-and-a-half hour session on the Hotline. This could be on non-case related duties such as assisting in training courses or attending certain predefined training course, official meetings and activities.

In SBHK, each member is given a volunteer number. In September 2015, the latest volunteer number was 2281. Members are forbidden to give their full name to the client. At most, members can provide their surname and membership number for identification to clients. Although SBHK does not encourage clients to choose workers, volunteers might wish to inform clients if they have a regular shift pattern, again for the purpose of identification. If a volunteer is worried about a situation and its escalation, the volunteer might ask for the client's consent

to call the client back at an agreed time. However, under no circumstances can they give clients their private contact details, such as a telephone number or email, for further communication.

There are other commitments, such as the obligation to attend AGMs and to follow the principle of confidentiality for casework. Being registered as a limited company, SBHK has its own Memorandum and Articles (M&A). The M&A was first introduced in 1994, and was revised in 1995, 2004 and 2012. The M&A is a resolution of the AGM and contains details of regulations and procedures to serve the members of SBHK under various circumstances. It is the most important document in the corporate governance of SBHK. For instance, one of the Articles indicates that the volunteers are basically shareholders and that Exco members are the directors of the organization. The detailed structure of the whole organization, membership definitions, election procedures, obligations, the responsibilities of ordinary members or executive committee members, and the discipline and appeal procedures are all covered (SBHK M&A, 2012).

### **Membership and numbers**

It is unfortunate that SBHK did not publish the numbers of its volunteers in its early annual reports. It was only in the 1996 that it started to do so. Table 1 below shows the numbers of volunteers in SBHK from 1996 to 2011, extracted from annual reports. It is noticeable that there were major changes between 1998 and 2002. The numbers soared from around 150 to over 200. These changes were probably the consequence of alterations to the recruitment policy by the executive committee and its effort to retain existing volunteers. However, there is little change in the ratio between male and female volunteers; over two-thirds are female.

Table 1 Numbers of volunteers from 1966 to 2013

Years	Male volunteers	Female Volunteers	Total Number
1996	No break down	No break down	130
1997	No break down	No break down	150
1998	No break down	No break down	150
1999	No record	No record	No record
2000	No record	No record	No record
2001	No record	No record	No record
2002	78	137	215
2003	87	149	236
2004	66	152	218
2005	61	143	204
2006	67	145	212
2007	76	184	260
2008	71	134	205
2009	70	128	198
2010	77	140	217
2011	75	137	212
2012	84	140	220
2013	79	129	208

Over the years, the turnover of volunteers has generally been high. Losses can occur during training or the working stage. In normal situations, the pass rate on the training course is about 50 to 60 per cent. This means that, in a training class of sixty, the number that successfully pass all tests is around thirty to forty. There are trainees who cannot meet the standards in terms of their ability to demonstrate empathetic and active listening skills. There are others who drop out due to lack of confidence in carrying out the task after understanding their own performance during training, and there may be some who basically want only to receive the training.

When trainees pass the test and begin to work for SBHK, they may have different experiences with clients. Some might feel unbearable pressure when talking with suicidal people; some might feel a deficiency when facing helpless clients; others might feel embarrassed when handling nuisance sex calls; some, who are more dependent on mutual support, might feel lonely when working alone at the centre; and others might find the service to be a waste of their time, as they do not encounter high-risk cases very often. Sometimes, volunteers quit when they do not agree with management policy; the author recalls a volunteer who resigned in protest at the management policy of not allowing a walk-in client to use the centre washroom!

Before the early 2000s, SBHK recruited volunteers once a year. While there might be a hundred trainees attending the training course, the number reaching the stage of listening to live calls could be about only forty. Owing to their different experiences in the service, described above,

more leave for their own reasons. As a result, only a small number remain in the service for a long time. Therefore, the average annual increment of the volunteers is not high, despite the fact that training has been organized every year.

Since the late 2000s, SBHK has conducted three recruitment exercises every two years. Since this occupies a large number of experienced volunteers in role-play sessions and day camps, the number of service hours is actually hampered by the training. The intention is now to increase the headcount by 50 per cent each year and to secure a minimum impact for the service. Notwithstanding the difficulties in fulfilling the training needs and requirements, SBHK still aims to select the most suitable volunteers for the service. Suicide may be a split-second life or death decision. Listening to people with suicidal ideation needs patience and special skills. SBHK prefers quality to quantity, therefore insists on selecting its volunteers carefully to protect its clients from unnecessary provocation and, at the same time, to protect its volunteers from burn-out.

Although there are numerous factors that deter volunteers from staying, surprisingly, there is still a certain number of volunteers who stay in the service for ten to even thirty years. The information in Table 2 is extracted from the annual report of 2013. This indicates the profile of the years of service by volunteers, as at 2013. It should be noted that there are seventy-five volunteers who had served for more than ten years (SBHK, 2013).

Table 2 Service years of Hotline volunteers (2013)

Years of Service	Male	Female
Below 1 year	17	16
2-3 years	10	26
4-5 years	9	18
6-7 years	8	12
8-9 Years	5	12
Above 10 years	30	45
Total	79	129

In fact, there are thirty-two volunteers who had served from between twenty and thirty-eight years. This book is written to explore the reasons for the long service of eleven of these volunteers. It is hoped that by understanding the reason for their longevity and the experiences which have affected them, SBHK and other, similar, voluntary organizations may benefit by learning what has fostered their long stay with SBHK. Hence, a tailor-made management policy to retain volunteers could be introduced to extend the service of volunteers to the full.

In the following chapters, I introduce and present the life stories that I have heard from these long-serving volunteers during my interviews with them. In general, each begins with how they joined this organization and what they experienced at different phases in their service. Although my research interest, which I shared with them, is to explore the reasons for their longevity in the service to help to develop our understanding of how best to help clients' training, I explained that what I would like to hear and what I was sure others would be interested in is why they had stayed in the service for so long.

It quickly became apparent that these stories not only provide a rich range of experiences while serving SBHK; they are also a strong cultural account of the social development of the past fifty years in Hong Kong.



## **The Experiences of Eleven Volunteers**

Manning the suicide prevention hotline is stressful and alarming in nature, due to the critical emotional status of the callers. Callers might be standing on the rooftop of a building, have taken hundreds of sleeping pills together with alcohol, have been burning charcoal to poison themselves with carbon monoxide (a typical way to commit suicide in Hong Kong), holding a rope before hanging themselves, or they might just be crying painfully without words to express their pain, silence being all that is left.

Volunteers at the telephone booth never know who the next caller will be. What problems will they have? How desperate will they be? What dangerous situation will they be in? Despite all these expected uncertainties, there are still a number of kind-hearted people who would like to join this service, instead of spending their spare time in normal pastimes such as being with family or friends, watching a movie, attending social functions or having a good night's sleep in their warm bed. They are willing to put themselves in alarming and stressful situations in the hope of helping others to find a more positive way out of their dilemma and adversity.

To manage such tasks, recruitment qualifications for volunteers for the Samaritan Befrienders of Hong Kong are rather simple. Any person who is a secondary school (i.e. GCE 'O' level) graduate aged over 18 years old without a criminal record is allowed to apply. There is no prerequisite for any counselling, social work, clinical caring knowledge or experience. Therefore, volunteers are recruited from various professions or are students. SBHK provides in-house training and assessment before they are fully qualified to work at the frontline.

I hope the stories of long-serving members will contribute to training by offering new volunteers or potential volunteers an insight that cannot be learned from manuals, but only from the experiences of others. It is for this reason that I have added small headings to the narratives.

In Chapters 1 to 11, I provide a short introduction to each of the eleven volunteers (including myself) who have over twenty years' service with SBHK. This is followed by their own account of their lives in this organization and how they have adapted themselves to face the challenges and uncertainties into which they are drawn by people at the edge of life and facing death.

# Chapter 1 – Jason Lee, the enduring volunteer

*Jason is the most senior volunteer in SBHK who is still serving. By interviewing Jason, I came to understand much more about the historical practice of this first Asian suicide prevention hotline service. In the following paragraphs, Jason recalls how he has maintained his service in SBHK for nearly forty years....*

## **Joining SBHK easily and group coincidently**

In fact, I joined SBHK by chance in July 1976. It was after my graduation from secondary school that I began my career in the construction industry. I worked from 7 am to 6 pm on a shift basis. One day, I saw an advertisement in the newspaper and thought that the service location of the then SBHK, which was at a resettlement housing estate in Lo Foo Ngam (*now known as Lok Fu*), was quite convenient for me. It was on the route between my home and my workplace. I could be a part of the service by taking a bus from my workplace. I called up the centre and sought some preliminary information on how volunteers worked at SBHK. My impression was that I did not need to spend much time there, and I didn't have much spare time. It was about one hour a week, but it was flexible about when that hour could be.

I thought that if I did not join SBHK, I might spend my spare time on the football pitch, or join the Civil Aid Services or the Royal Hong Kong Regiment. They were both auxiliary discipline forces that young people joined after work as voluntary service. However, I was not aware of the reason which drove me to have this kind of thought. Perhaps this was a normal course of action for youth during that period in Hong Kong.

In the 1970s, SBHK was not very systematic about selecting volunteers. Those who were interested could easily join the service. As a matter of fact, the early SBHK was mainly manned by teachers of the Mu Kuang English School and some other volunteers. Three to four schoolteachers would report for duty after 4 pm and I usually covered the hours after 6 pm. Very few people were available to do mornings or during school hours. However, some nurses who worked shifts could occasionally provide a service in the daytime.

Since there were always insufficient people to staff the centre, I took up three to four shifts a week during weekdays. Very often, I was the only volunteer at the centre for most of the day. In the evenings, apart from listening to calls, together with other volunteers we would be busy taking part in many different activities such as writing articles, or editing monthly bulletins or other publications. Very often we did not leave the centre until 11 pm to catch the last bus home.

## **Learning beyond own professional knowledge**

I found it special to work in SBHK. As I worked in the construction industry, I did not encounter many problematic life issues apart from listening on the Hotline. There was not much pre-service training organized for volunteers; however some on-the-job training sessions were provided. Such training included talks from invited professionals from other organizations such

as the Society for the Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention Hong Kong, and the Family Planning Association to introduce how to handle certain kinds of people, such as ex-prisoners or psychiatric patients. SBHK also invited psychiatrists or general medical practitioners to give lectures. Lawyers were invited to brief volunteers on the procedure for divorce or criminal proceedings. Sometimes, we might reach out to visit other organizations.

Although there was no formal training system, this sort of briefing provided me and other volunteers with much other knowledge beyond our own professions. I thought that this kind of knowledge enriched my life a great deal. A teacher normally would not know how to handle an ex-prisoner or how divorce proceedings were carried out. No single professional could provide information on so many aspects for staff to learn. SBHK provided other knowledge beyond my own professionalism. Similar to its present practice, SBHK organized many visits to other organizations. Such visits allowed the volunteers to understand more about social resources and how other organizations worked. It also helped the personal growth of volunteers.

### **Good internal cohesion built friendship**

In that period, I recall that the Hotline was not very busy. Very often, even half the time, volunteers were waiting for calls. While we were waiting, we initiated much casual discussion among ourselves. We might sit in a circle and discuss certain government policies or serious topics such as 'what is love?', or explore the topics to be covered in the monthly bulletin. Sometimes, we introduced our own professions to other volunteers and even had self-disclosure of personal troubles in our lives. In this way, the volunteers formed a very strong bond and were able to support each other. As there were only about forty to fifty volunteers, we knew each other very well and became very good friends. We reported for duty regularly; we basically grew in understanding each other.

Friendship was a by-product of the service in SBHK. I have many fond memories and shared passions with this group of volunteers. We had known each other since our youth. We had no conflict of interest or any competition among us. It was quite different from working relationships with colleagues where one might lose contact soon after a colleague left the company, even though we had worked together for five to six years.

By the nature of the service, we had a common goal – to serve people in need. We could share our personal lives and support others. This was a kind of friendship that money cannot buy. SBHK provided a platform for me to nurture such kinds of friendship with a group of people as a by-product of its service. It was very similar to the situation in a church, where Christians came to know each other under the fellowship of service to God, while in SBHK the common objective is to help other people.

It was only in SBHK that I could maintain friendships with my peers. None of my classmates from primary and secondary school or my colleagues reached this level of close contact. In the past, we went hiking and camping, and had meals together. We even went to provide a regular service at St Christopher's Home for Children, to play with underprivileged children every Saturday, for about two to three years. Now, after thirty years, although some of the volunteers

have left the service, the cohesion is still there. The same group of up to about fifteen people continues to meet or even to go for overseas holidays together. Our friendship has lasted for a long time. It is just like the Taiwan film, *You Are the Apple of my Eye*: people connected since youth become good friends.

### **Exercise discretion in handling clients**

I witnessed the early stages of SBHK, which was not very systematic. There were not many rules for volunteers to follow. Volunteers often needed to exercise their own judgment. A certain number of cases were, in fact, referred from hospitals or police stations. Very often, a policeman would bring clients to the centre. Besides some walk-in cases, there was an occasion when a policeman brought a client to the centre at 11 pm, and I needed to talk to the client until 3 am.

I have experienced many challenges during my service. One Chinese New Year's Eve, some twenty years ago, a policeman brought to SBHK a suicidal client who was suffering from homesickness. By 4 am, I finished the casework, but I had to call off my tradition of visiting the Chinese New Year floral market with my family, as the market had already closed and had been taken down! It was fortunate that I had the understanding of my family members about skipping this annual activity.

I also recall an occasion when I lent \$20 to a client to buy food. Although there was no rule at SBHK to regulate this practice in the early stages, such action was viewed with disquiet by other volunteers and Uncle Chao, who was the watchman residing at the centre. Without regret, I lent the money to the client. In fact, he kept his promise and returned the \$20 to SBHK the following week. It was, in fact, a very difficult decision for me. I trusted the client and, at that moment, I thought that I could really help the client, although I knew that the management of SBHK might not agree. The management did not want volunteers to have any private monetary relationship with clients. Since the client was hungry and had no money, I really thought that the \$20 could help him with his immediate needs.

The client returned the money to the centre without saying anything. I did not really care about the money. The client put down the money and left. I was very pleased to prove my judgment over the creditability of that client, and concluded that not everyone was as deceitful as we might think. For me, it was important to satisfy the immediate needs of the client. There were other volunteers who noticed that I gave money to clients. After the client had left, we did have a short discussion and I basically said that the client's problem was solved. We then continued to staff the centre as usual.

It was after this incident that SBHK started to keep a small amount of petty cash at the centre for this type of emergency use. On the same grounds, SBHK sometimes paid overnight room rental at small motels in Yau Ma Tei if volunteers encountered homeless clients with a temporary need for shelter. The fact is that survival and shelter are basic needs of human beings, according to Abraham H. Maslow (1954), and it was important for me to handle any difficulties of the client on the spot.

**Teamwork for outreaching case**

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were times when I had to engage the help of the police to trace the address of a telephone call to try to save a suicidal client. Much teamwork was required for this sort of action. While I was maintaining the conversation with the client, the other volunteers contacted the police to explain what SBHK was doing. Very often, when the volunteers arrived on the scene, the client had already been delivered to the hospital by ambulance. Volunteers would then follow up the case with the family members of the client. The teamwork was relatively simple and straightforward, in those days. However, this practice has changed. There are protocols to be followed by volunteers under such circumstances. Now, volunteers would not normally follow up the case immediately, as the social resources are very different in Hong Kong now, compared to the 1960s.

**Stay calm under stress**

In fact, all the different challenges that I have encountered at SBHK have trained me to handle emergency situations in a much calmer way. Nowadays, I do not panic if clients threaten to carry out a plan of action. It is not unusual for clients to say that they are about to commit suicide, going to die or similar potentially manipulative words, but I do not panic over this. With experience, I became more mature and stable in my emotional reaction. I recall that there was a fire in my office ten years ago. While other colleagues panicked and were confused in their reactions, I calmly picked up a fire extinguisher and put out the fire. I reflected that it was this challenging experience in SBHK had contributed to my ability to stay calm in an emergency. I was pleased to see this development in myself.

**Mysterious service**

Another challenge that I recall, in particular, was the requirement to keep case information confidential. This contributed to the uniqueness of this suicide prevention hotline service; that is, the mysterious nature of the service in the eyes of the public. Since volunteers were obliged not to disclose the content and personal data of clients to the public, the service was deemed secretive. In earlier days, members were not allowed to disclose their volunteer identity to their friends and relatives. You could imagine how secretive the service was and how the volunteers were trained to comply with the confidential rules wholeheartedly to protect the privacy of clients. Nevertheless, the identity rule has been relaxed nowadays and volunteers can choose to disclose their membership identity, provided this is not for commercial purposes. However, the need to keep case information confidential remains unchanged. I have followed the confidential principle strictly over the years. I have not disclosed details of the cases that I have handled, even in this interview!

**Chance to explore on knowledge**

In retrospect, I think that the challenges that I have encountered have reinforced my determination to stay in the service. However, I realize that it was not during interactions with clients that I crystallized that thought. In fact, it was during a group discussion, when volunteers

were sitting together to explore topics or discuss the handling of certain cases, that I recognized the benefits of staying in SBHK, and how valuable were the knowledge and experience that I had gained. During a normal day, I did not think about what I had learned from the service. Perhaps those topics of discussion were common or interesting to any youths, and such discussion could be in depth. Since volunteers at SBHK were free to have such discussions, it made it different from other organizations; in a business or commercial setting, it just would not happen. At that period, common topics in the workplace could be horse racing or gambling, and others were seldom discussed.

In fact, the crystallization of knowledge helped me to look at things from more than one aspect. As time goes by, I have noticed that I have changed, so I would not be too insistent on my initial view. When there were different views, I would step back and listen, and think about what others were saying. After evaluating its reasonableness, I would decide whether to accept a view or not. In general, I found myself able to think more clearly and have a better overall understanding.

### **Never thought of leaving**

I have never thought of leaving SBHK, as it is part of my life. My family members were in total support of my services. I have not changed my passion for the service, and there was no appraisal system for volunteers in the 1960s. I just reported for duty for three to four evenings, from Monday to Friday, based on when I was available. I normally asked my family not to keep any dinner for me on weekday evenings. After my marriage, I reduced this frequency to one to two sessions a week, especially when I had children. Unlike in the very old days, SBHK has been using an appraisal system to monitor the attendance of volunteers for the past decade. I was still happy to fulfil the minimum requirements for attendance to maintain my membership and to help other people.

It was fortunate that I had a rather stable life. My habit to report for duty became a Sunday church-like service. It was regular for me, and my parents received no complaints from anyone, even though I occasionally worked until 1 or 2 am. I had the understanding of my family. Although my family members knew that I went to SBHK and listened to calls, I did not tell them in detail. I kept quiet in terms of telling them what I had done. There were occasions when I left there at 2 am, but needed to leave my home for work by 6 to 7 am. However, this did not happen very often. In most of the cases, I took the last bus by 11 pm and returned home by midnight with the understanding of my family members.

### **Unmarried men took overnight duties once a month**

For OND, I used to report for duty with my peer group. Since I worked on a shift basis, I could undertake an OND on weekdays and have a proper rest the following day, when I returned home by 9 to 10 am. I did not report for OND after my marriage. Traditionally, only unmarried men needed to undertake one OND per month, and women and married men were not required to do any. This rule was changed in the 1990s so that all newly recruited members had to undertake OND. Only some very long-serving volunteers were exempted from the rule.

### **Volunteers with more passion with minimal management system**

Over the years, I have experienced both the period, when SBHK was not so systematic in managing volunteers, and the present era, when SBHK has many rules and regulations for volunteers to follow. However, I think that volunteers in the past contributed more than at present. It was not the management or appraisal system that retained the members in the service or kept the turnover rate down. The more official are the minimum requirements, the more there will be volunteers who only just meet these minimum requirements. There is always 'give and take' in setting up a policy, yet I recognize that in the past there were more volunteers with passion under the minimal management system. At exit interviews, volunteers who quit the service may not give their true reasons for leaving. They will normally be very polite and say how they no longer have the time, and whether they are upset by the system or have other reasons will never be revealed.

### **Too demanding on present volunteer selection**

In reality, there are many organizations which people can serve as volunteers; SBHK is not the only one. It is questionable why they would want to stay in an organization with so many rules, regulations and requirements. Besides, I note that some current volunteer trainers are too demanding of the standard required to be a volunteer. They impose too stringent requirements for volunteers to qualify during the training and evaluation process. This might upset volunteers during the training process. For me, more patience and chances should be given to trainees to build up their skills. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that there are cultural differences among people living in different decades.

### **Benefited from learning communication skill**

In terms of character, I admit that I am, by nature, a loyal person. I am a stable person and not tempted to change frequently. This could be one of the reasons why I have been able to stay in SBHK for so long. Unlike some people who become fed up by repeating the same things again and again, I rarely have such a feeling. For instance, my first job in the construction industry lasted for twenty years, with some promotion. It was fortunate for me that there were not many difficult times in my career and life to force me to change profession or company. I also consider that SBHK actually helped me in my career, as I worked alongside colleagues all the time and, as a team leader, my communication skills from SBHK benefited me well. Although the nature of my service for SBHK did not call for the same sort of requirements as other disciplines, it did not have a negative impact on my personality or the image of manhood that society expected of me. In fact, the communication skills I learned from SBHK were applicable in my job, as well.

### **Just like serving in a family**

Serving in SBHK is part of my life. Apart from my passion to help people in need and my keenness to face challenging situations and treasure my special group of friends in SBHK, I also had a unique passion for the infrastructure of SBHK. As I was in the construction business all the time that I was serving in SBHK, I provided some of my professional knowledge in renovating various centres.

I remember on one occasion that I responded to an appeal from the management to clean up the centre. I was among a group of volunteers who gathered to renovate the oldest Lo Foo Ngam Center. It was just like family members acting together to clean the house. The sense of family life was unique to SBHK. We also decided to change the floor tiles by ourselves. We approached a construction material company for sponsorship for the tiles. It ended up that the company donated the tiles to SBHK and sent two workers to help us to replace them. For me, it was a touching moment to see people from different walks of life supporting the work of SBHK. Later, I was involved in the renovation and design when SBHK moved to the Shun Lee Center, the present Choi Hung Center and the Pat Tin Center. I hope that I contributed professional construction knowledge to smooth the renovation work at these centres. I had passion for every single tile at the centres. SBHK is part of my life, and is part of my growth and development.

### **Being a group leader was not an easy role**

I have been a group leader and executive committee (Exco) member. To be a group leader in the past was not easy as at present. Normally, group leaders really needed to stay for four to five hours at the centre. They needed to pay attention to any group member who did not turn up for duty for two or three weeks. The group leader would contact the member and try to understand what had happened. To be an Exco member for two terms, I had to devise a policy for SBHK. However, I was aware that it would be a slow process for Exco to conclude it, as I recalled that meetings were always long when discussing how to implement policy.

### **Not under pressure to leave**

I really have been serving for a very long time in SBHK. However, as I have become used to everything in the organization, I have no stress or pressure in continuing this service. I considered not disclosing the details of clients as a commitment that I made to SBHK. Under no circumstance would I violate that rule. It is for this reason that SBHK seems to be secretive in its service, as volunteers do not talk in public about the cases they have handled. Perhaps it is this secretive nature that attracts people to join the service.

In conclusion, I think that I have acted as any ordinary citizen. After graduating from school, I proceeded to work, and I searched for a simple life. Even nowadays, if people do not go to happy hours or karaoke after work, their life would go back to a simple form. It is a matter of how people react at different times in their lives. I mentioned that I might have chosen to join one of the forces such as the Royal Hong Kong Regiment or the Civil Aid Services. However, I did not see their recruitment advertisements before I saw SBHK's. It was just a coincidence that I joined SBHK, despite the fact that such a coincidence has lasted so long.



## Chapter 2 – Han, the lifetime teacher

*Han joined the Hotline service in 1990, when she changed from working for the government to teaching at a special school for children with intellectual disabilities. Since her school finished by 4 pm, she considered that she had spare time to undertake a social service. In the following paragraphs, Suk Han tells us how she spends most of her time at SBHK and teaching....*

### **Does not know the reason for joining social service, but SBHK was suggested by a friend**

I had no idea in my mind of joining a particular kind of social service. However, I have a friend who served as volunteer before on the SBHK Hotline. The friend suggested SBHK to me without much thought, and I applied to be a volunteer. Frankly, if I had not joined SBHK, I would have joined another service.

It seems to me that carrying out some kind of social service in my spare time is something simple and straightforward. I am not able to attribute this to any influence from my friends or any incidents that I have involved in.

I did not have much volunteer experience in my primary and secondary school, or even in my tertiary education. I only did one-off service during summer school. My schoolmates preferred part-time jobs to volunteer work, to provide them with more pocket money. None of my family members did any social service apart from my father, who belonged to the neighbourhood committee of his residential housing estate. I speculate that it might have been the social atmosphere that persuaded me to do social service in my spare time. However, I cannot recall any special social event that triggered that thought.

My life is uneventful. Nothing bothers me and I have no particular aim in life. I developed an interest in reading books in secondary school. In particular, I love to read books on Chinese history.

### **Lonely service environment on Saturday discouraged my commitment**

Soon after the completion of my training as a volunteer, I reported for duty. I initially chose to report for duty every Saturday. This gave me a feeling of zero confidence in handling calls. The usual supporting environment at the training stage, with a number of mentors or group leaders around, simply vanished. When I reported for duty, I found myself unaccompanied by any other volunteers. There was a feeling of a lack of support. The situation came to a point when I did think of quitting the service. Each time that I reported for duty was difficult for me. I was uneasy with the quiet working environment. Since there was no one to share an experience or to discuss how I handled the cases or how others could handle similar cases, I felt a lack of opportunity to reflect and improve. I started to question my ability to handle clients. This was especially true after I had handled clients with extreme characteristics, such as those who were manipulative or psychiatric.

The difficulties and obstacles that I encountered pushed me towards indifference. I was

reluctant to report for regular service. To my mind, a volunteer should feel happy and comfortable about the service. The difficulties lasted for the first year of my volunteer life in SBHK. However, I did not quit and successfully found my way out of this adversity.

Incidentally, I recognized that having volunteers around me would enhance my confidence in handling cases. I might be incompetent and be led on by a client, on some occasions, and when this happened I felt defeated (by the client). However, even if I felt like that, if I could discuss the situation with fellow volunteers, and about my handling of cases and my feelings, I could still recover. With that in mind, I decided to change my group.

### **Regained confidence after changing group**

I decided to report for duty on Fridays instead of Saturdays. There were more volunteers on Friday evenings. With the Friday team, I was able to share my feelings freely after listening to calls. Nothing could be better for me. With the support of team members, I gradually rebuilt my confidence. I discussed things with other volunteers and found out that there are many different ways to handle a case; there is no single and absolutely perfect way to handle a client. My mind became more relaxed when listening to calls. My confidence returned.

I concluded that working alone on the Hotline is not good practice. It is better for volunteers to share their experience and feelings after listening to calls. Such sharing among volunteers encourages them to reflect on what happened and what improvements could be made. This is a constructive evaluation of one's performance. It also helps the volunteer to reorganize what happened during the process. Without this supportive environment, my reflections would be miserable, spiraling down towards self-criticism and lack of confidence in my ability.

### **Handling of dramatic clients**

Some responses from clients are dramatic. Clients' response to volunteers' conversation could be totally unexpected. Manipulative clients may try to criticize volunteers' work, from time to time, trying to establish their leading role in the conversation. Psychiatric clients might totally disregard what the volunteers are saying and only consider their own world. Inexperienced volunteers would feel defeated by handling these kinds of extreme and dramatic responses. It is important for new volunteers to have more support in handling these sorts of clients.

During my stay with the Friday team, I was stable in my volunteer work. In fact, I was the group leader for two to three years. Since the good culture of the group had been established for some time, it was not too difficult for me to promote bonding among team members. What I needed to do was to arrange proper occasions for team members to meet and share experiences. Even when I organized recreational events for the group, I did not forget to introduce an element of group discussion during activities to allow messages from the Exco to be passed down to members and for members give feedback on various service- or membership-related issues.

It was not only my initiative, but the thoughts of some of my group members, that there were plenty of friends and occasions when members could gather purely for recreational activities.

Therefore, we did not need to provide this kind of activity. Instead, discussion of issues in the Hotline would enhance volunteers' sense of belonging. Enthusiastic members would be more willing to give their time up for such a gathering.

### **More interest in being a reflective trainer**

Unlike other group leaders, I did not want to become an Exco member. Instead, I became more active in volunteer training. I like to help out in various training courses for new volunteers. I need to comment on their paperwork, listen to their tape-recorded homework and act as a facilitator to lead the role-play exercises of recruits. I think that being involved in this sort of primary skill training may help both the recruit and myself. By giving feedback to trainees, I can consolidate my knowledge and experience. It is a revision and reflection for me, as well.

Monitoring the live calls received by trainees is also beneficial for me. I need to be more analytical in conceptualising the personality of the client. Together with the role-play exercises, it requires more acute listening skills from me to be able to clear my own mind and then to comment on the performance of the trainees. Again, it provides more chances for self-reflection. Frankly, I might not proceed with such reflection if I did not take part in this training activity. I would not reflect without a good reason for so doing. The training provides a stimulus for me. During past training sessions, I observed that some trainees were very eager to learn. They demonstrated a high level of interest in the topics. I was very pleased to see this, not because of my full-time teaching profession at a special school for mentally retarded children but because I was happy to see the positive response and the enthusiasm of the trainees. In fact, I did not have any feelings of dissatisfaction during training.

### **Confidence in handling life crisis**

As an overview of my life and experience in SBHK, I feel increasing confidence in handling clients with emotional problems. I have been able to handle most of the difficult clients I have encountered. Apart from this improvement in the service, I recognize my own improvement in facing difficulties in my own life. However, the experience of the Hotline service has equipped me psychologically with the ability to face challenges and crisis more calmly. *Well-being or happiness is not guaranteed.* There are clients who have a much better life condition than many people, but still suffer from chronic unhappiness. In simple terms, they cannot let go of the unpleasant experiences that have triggered their long-term unhappiness.

### **Letting go is one of the choices**

I am not sure whether I could let go of such an unfortunate experience if it happened to me. However, I acknowledge the fact that, by listening to the stories of clients, I have been given many reminders of the importance of this ability to let go. I think that, as a human being, I might not be so conscious of being able to detach myself from bad feelings immediately if something tragic happened. However, I am confident that I would, after a while, have the ability to 'wake up' and remind myself that there are choices for me. In brief, my Hotline experience has allowed me to see the possibility of making a positive choice, even if an unfortunate event did happen. With a rational choice, I would be able to let go of the sadness and find a new way out.

**Provide minimal service while studying**

I do not feel tired of handling Hotline cases after working a full day at my special school for mentally retarded children, although these children, aged between 6 and 18, are very energetic. I admit that I need more physical strength to look after these children than mental strength. As a matter of fact, there was less pressure in this job in the 1980s than in the 1990s. Society was simpler and the requirements of taking care of children were also simple. I only needed to consider their class work and therefore there was a lighter workload after school. However, the situation changed after 1995 and 1996, when the local educational reform materialized. I needed to study for a Bachelor's degree in order to retain my teaching job. With the increased daytime workload and the burden of studying, I was exhausted and could not retain my high level of attendance at the Hotline service. Nevertheless, I passed my annual appraisal with minimum attendance. It was a tough period. However, my reasonable commitment and resilience allowed me to overcome this hurdle, and I was able to provide an uninterrupted service to the community.

**Satisfaction in being able to help**

I feel satisfaction from my service through my interaction with clients and trainees. Although I might not feel satisfaction after every client, in general I feel that I am satisfied with my interactions. It is the effect of my relationship and conversation with clients, their responses and the ability to maintain my goals in the process that satisfies me. I have found that I can help other people.

A typical case reflecting this is about a mental patient. He talked to me for 45 minutes. I felt his confusion in thinking, during our conversation. His feelings were of worry and panic. He was worrying that the volunteer would not allow him to speak much. I gave him the confidence to speak up and allowed him to talk about his experience, and even his anxiety about our telephone conversation. By patiently giving the client the time to speak about his concerns, I felt that I was able to help him. However, I understand that there is a limit to this kind of service. In the event that a client wishes to talk for several hours, I do not think that it is appropriate to accommodate their request unless they are at a high risk of suicide.

Another satisfaction that I have experienced is from volunteer training. It is another feeling of being able to help, although this time the target is the trainees, not the clients. Perhaps, as I am a teacher in a special school, my perception of the responses of the students could be different from other teachers from ordinary schools or trainers in SBHK. It is my subjective, happy feeling to see the good responses from the trainees. Nevertheless, I also admit that I feel satisfaction when I help other teachers to reorganize the files on their computer in a neat and tidy manner. It resembles the situation when I help emotionally confused clients to reorganize their thoughts and feelings; they end up with emotional relief. Indeed, I derive satisfaction from the process of helping others, perhaps especially in clarifying messy situations.

**No thought of leaving SBHK**

I have never thought of leaving SBHK in twenty years, apart from in my first year of service

when I had less support. As I become stable in my confidence, I no longer needed the same level of support from other volunteers! I am able to sustain my momentum in the service by myself. Unless there is a major change in my life, such as changes in family life that result in my having less spare time available for me, I will continue with my service.

### **Human resilience is amazing**

One of the cases that left a deep impression on me is about a man calling the Hotline saying that his wife had left him all of a sudden. He just went home after work and saw a note that she left for him. His wife had taken all the valuable items and left without any further news. The client was depressed and became a frequent caller to the Hotline. The impact of losing her was so strong that he was basically in shock. Originally, he had had a good and happy family life. Suddenly, he seemed to have lost everything. One day, after a period of time, I picked up a call from this same client. In fact, the client had called to thank me for the assistance that SBHK had offered him. He had digested the sadness and let it go. He was able to lead a better life. I, of course, was very happy to see this change in the client. While acknowledging the coolness of a world where such tragic incidents could occur, I was impressed by the resilience of human beings. Despite the fact that tragedy is unpredictable, how a person can recover from such a tragedy is amazing.

### **Put the past aside, live for the present moment**

I am learning about Buddhism now. I notice that Buddhism also advocates letting go of our sadness by living in the present moment, or the concept of living here and now. I recall that, from the time that I joined SBHK, I have read many books written by retired psychiatrists. They describe the way that people are able to deal with their sadness. In fact, I notice that their concepts are very close to the Buddhist concept of letting go. There are commonalities between counselling and Buddhism belief. The concept of living in the present moment and putting past sad experiences aside is always the ultimate way to live a better and happy life.

### **Life is not controllable; treasure what one gets**

I remember another case about a musician who was suffering from depression. She had no financial problems, but her mental illness led her very unhappy life. I felt her helplessness. Although she had good living conditions, in fact far better than many people, nothing could help her to regain a happier life. I was empathic to her situation, but she was not able to help herself to relieve her situation. My 'nothing can do' feeling was not easy to absorb. From this case, I understand that life is not always controllable; we should treasure what we have while we do not suffer from a similar sickness. I do not know what if I would do if I was in the same situation. Whether or not I could survive better is not certain. However, this experience on the Hotline keeps reminding me of the importance of letting go of unhappiness and how unpredictable the world is. I think that I have been equipped with some skills to live through difficult times.

## Chapter 3 – Tooyoung, the commitment seeker

### **Pushed by a good friend to join SBHK**

*Tooyoung joined SBHK in 1987 in her late 30s. She is a nurse at a care centre for the elderly. The main reason that she joined the service was the influence of one of her very good friends Lee, a classmate of hers since primary school, who was an active member of the Hotline. According to Tooyoung, Lee is the kind of person who is willing to help other people. They share their life experience between them without any secrets. Below is what Tooyoung recalled at the interview....*

My original intention was to make my living by machine sewing. However, Lee persuaded me to be a nurse. She convinced me that it would be better to have professional knowledge of one kind. Lee then helped me to apply for a nursing course and ultimately I became a nurse. Lee changed her job to another hospital and I followed her. I then worked for another twenty years at the hospital. She once commented that nursing is arduous, but professional. Not everyone can be a nurse. A nurse needs to be trained and cannot be afraid to undertake uncongenial work.

Lee had an influence on me, as I find her smart and able to live independently. I have known her since primary school. My relationship with her is better than with my siblings. Even siblings might not discuss so many things. From school to personal problems, we share our secrets. Lee has her unique view and encourages me not to think about minor issues.

One day, Lee said to me that I needed to do ‘something’ and persuaded me to join the suicide prevention hotline of SBHK, as she was one of the members. Lee even filled in the application form for me to sign. With a strong push from her, I joined the year-long training course and started my service as a Hotline volunteer.

### **Value of existence of SBHK**

After some years, Lee migrated to another country. On one occasion, she came back to Hong Kong and was surprised to see me still serving in SBHK. I mentioned to her that the longer I stay, the more I see its worth and benefits. It is unfortunate that Lee later changed from being a Christian to a Buddhist. As a Christian, I find it difficult to share my religious ideas with her. Nevertheless, we can still share everything apart from religion.

Many people and NGOs avoid handling suicidal or emotional clients. They consider them troublesome, and to talk endlessly about their unhappiness or repeat their problems. The problems, in fact, cannot be solved. In fact, there might not even be a need to solve the problem. People just want to be listened to or to be given the chance to vent their emotions. Working in SBHK is different. I have a good deal of stress in my job, but not at SBHK. When I listen to calls, I feel that my life is not as bad as that of others. I understand that there is no way to solve clients’ problem readily. I admit my academic qualifications are not high, but I have a

job and am healthy. I could continue to improve my family life, and feel touched but not proud of my life. I am able to support my son to study abroad. I feel satisfied as an ordinary person.

### **Like sharing life experience with clients**

Compared to clients, I feel much better and I wish to help others, even though I consider myself just a little better than others. I know that there are many people in society who need assistance. I might not know how to help each client. Being a volunteer, I could offer my energy and time. I use my life experience to share with others. I feel touched sometimes, when listening to calls. There are so many problems that I could not help to solve, but I do feel as though I am in the same shoes as clients.

Occasionally, I have transformed my life experience in another way, such as learning from newspapers or books, and then using them to help clients. Clients might question whether it was my personal experience and I would deny it. However, my intention is to allow the clients to be aware of certain considerations during the analysis of their situations.

There are some common problems such as parenting problems, and career or interpersonal relationship issues. It is very common for me as a volunteer to feel embarrassed, criticized or pleased during a conversation. In case where clients are in debt, I really do not know how to help them to obtain money. However, I believe that I can listen to them and soothe their stress. Their problems are still there, yet I would encourage them to solve their problem by themselves.

### **Problem becoming life experience**

I know that, with so many things happening in my life, there are things that even I cannot solve. At a particular moment, one might not know how to solve a problem. However, it becomes part of our life experience afterwards. It becomes less important to the person. After all, health is the most important thing. Anything else is less important. After my son was married, I had nothing to worry about in my life.

### **Appreciate the value of SBHK**

However, I am not a puppet. I chose SBHK as I agree with its core values to serve strangers without any prerequisites. I acknowledge the fact that many citizens do not have the luxury of having someone to talk to about their problems.

I understand my ability to be a good listener, and treasure this role. There are people who are trapped in certain thoughts in their mind. They cannot escape, as no one wants to listen to them. It is similar to when someone phones a friend, but their friend feels annoyed with the repeated calls and starts to distance the person. They do not respond to calls when seeing the caller's details displayed on the phone. While a Samaritan Befriender is on duty, they listen to calls impartially. SBHK listens to anyone, as they might not have friends. I think that the philosophy of SBHK matches my own, which is to serve people in need. This is one of the most important reasons that keeps me at SBHK, as well as its true value and why it has been going for so long.

Of course, back in 1987 I never thought of maintaining this voluntary service for so long. In retrospect, I notice a strong sense of commitment to the service. It is this sense of commitment to serve others that keeps me in the service.

### **Commitment inherited from parents**

I also notice that I have a great deal of passion in talking about commitment. It is not just a commitment to serve as a volunteer. It is also a commitment to help other people and to take on one's responsibilities. Commitment means a great deal to me.

My sense of commitment could be inherited from my parents. They are uneducated but very good parents. I remember that my father, despite being uneducated, is a real father. He took on responsibility for the whole family, taking care of five children. He was hardworking. He taught his children to be trustful. It was rare to see an adult of that generation who did not smoke. He was the kind of gentleman who did not use bad language. He used to use a particular Chinese cliché that meant 'killing the whole family'. When I asked him why he kept on saying this to curse his own family, he was receptive and immediately stopped using that saying. I was impressed by the commitment of my father to take on his man's role to take care of the family. It is a lifelong commitment for any parent. My parents are able to demonstrate this role vividly.

### **Setting an example of serving**

Although I said about my parents' commitment to the family, they originally did not agree to my serving as a volunteer. Instead, I wished to practise and to teach them how to help others. I wished that they could one day know the philosophy of helping. 'A volunteer gets no money! There is no time to take care of the children!' said my parents. I only told them that I went to study at evening school every Monday. At first they did not know. Neither my parents, my husband nor my son were aware of my secret service! After a few years, they asked me why I studied so long. When I told them the truth, they did not object to it anymore, as I had been serving for so long.

My son encouraged me and said, as I was working only a few hours immediately before I retired from my daytime nursing job, that I should continue to serve as volunteer and not quit. He knew that I would not stop doing things. He urged me to reconsider whether I really wanted to quit. I understood that my son might have worried that I would trouble him a great deal if I had nothing to do regularly. However, I told him that I would not. At the same time, I encouraged him to be a volunteer. Everyone has the ability to help others. He is better than other people, in one sense, and should serve others. That is why at one point he regularly took children to an activity in Tseung Kwan O area. It was only when he found a job that he was too busy to continue this.

In fact, one of my sisters is also a volunteer, for the Society for the Visually Impaired People. She reads books and newspapers aloud and audio-records them for members of the society to listen to. It is an interesting service. I have two other sisters who are not resident in Hong Kong. I do not know if they do any voluntary work or not. However, I seem to have been affected by my



father. He is patient and has a good emotion quotient. He has a great for accepting others. Apart from giving monetary assistance, he helps others. He has empathy for other people and encourages me to help my neighbours.

Another example of commitment that I have seen is the commitment by Lee to helping other people. I am touched by her enthusiasm to help me. She encouraged me to be professional, and convinced and pushed me to become a volunteer to do 'something'. I consider Lee as a person who would lend all her money in order to help others. I am surprised to see someone like this. Compared to her, I have less patience. My temper is not as good as hers. However, I believe that I have inherited empathy from my father. Neither of them are the kind of person who would hurt others. As a nurse, I could clean a wound and stitch it, but no one could make me use a knife to cut flesh; I could not do it without assistance from a surgeon. I could not use a knife to hurt anyone. Neither could I join a triad society to hurt others.

Lee always reminds me of my freedom of choice and to do the most important thing in my life. On one occasion, I talked casually with my boss. He told me frankly that he could not undertake voluntary service as I did. Neither was he able to commit all his money to helping other people. I told him that he could reach another level of life satisfaction if he could do so. It would bring peacefulness in his mind to let go of everything. This was what I discovered that Lee was doing. Being a Christian, I admired Mother Teresa for her humbleness in serving people in need.

### **From membership to friendship**

If I had a sabbatical, I would not know what to do. I have remained with SBHK for twenty years and have complied with all the duty requirements. It was the author of this book, Vincent, and later on other volunteers whom I met occasionally who have influenced me. If I had not joined SBHK or meet other volunteers, I would not have such a circle of friends. They have given me many joyous moments. They are a group of friends who cannot be found in other places. Together with other members, I developed from a membership relationship to friendships. For instance, when I saw someone come back in a bad mood, I asked if they had been scolded by their boss. After mutual encouragement and sharing, the feeling became better. Through sharing of happiness, sadness and life problems, members mutually encourage each other.

### **Adjustment for active listening**

In the early days at SBHK, I found my listening style did not match the active listening skills that SBHK appeals for. In the Hotline service, volunteers are not supposed to disclose their personal experience. Neither could volunteers readily give advice to clients. Active listening skills promote empathic responses from volunteers, focusing on the emotion of the clients. However, there is a strong tendency for anyone who talks with friends to give personal opinions or advice. SBHK does not recommend giving advice or being too focused on problem solving. I found that I need to do much extra work to override this personal tendency. Because of my commitment to serving people in need, I have let go of my own talking style and have learned to use these particular listening skills accordingly. This is my commitment to serve in SBHK, when I agree with the core belief of the organization. I have to adopt the approach recommended by the organization in order to conduct my role properly.

**Christian life and live everyday with meaning**

I became a Christian in primary school. My religious belief fosters my attitude to helping others. I believe that it is a Christian's duty to help others. I have adopted this value without question. Becoming one of the Samaritan Befrienders, I can help others regularly. I believe that Jesus Christ should receive a good impression of me!

Life is interesting. No one knows what will happen tomorrow; therefore everyone is brave to live each day. If the future is known, people would not live in such a relaxed way or so happily. If everything was known ahead of time, there would be no news. No one knows what tomorrow will bring. Tomorrow, a person might become a millionaire, but the person only knows and enjoys the happiness tomorrow. If one knows that one will die the day after tomorrow, one might carry out crimes or good deeds, or might not do anything but just wait for death. It is because people do not know about their fate that they have the courage to live every day with meaning.

However, after serving for so many years, I have discovered an imbalance in society. I feel unhappy for those people who are over-reliant on social resources or who are too dependent on others. Some people shift their problems to society. They do not think about their own responsibility: 'I'm underprivileged and could not help myself!' or 'I have a mental problem and you have to help me.' I do not appreciate this attitude.

**Leaving SBHK**

Serving SBHK for over twenty years is a long period. Over the years, I have found that it is wonderful to have come to know so many people. In fact, the number of people whom I knew at the SBHK annual dinner was more than the guests I knew at my son's wedding. I really enjoy my role as a member of SBHK.

In 2006, I seriously considered quitting the service and taking up another service in China to help AIDS victims and their families. Those people were not infected with AIDS because of their irresponsible behaviour, but as a result of blood transfusions or sharing of medical equipment. They did not have money to cure themselves. The government and society ignored them. They were put aside unattended, and their needs were not catered for. I knew that there was a danger of contracting this deadly disease during the work, but I thought that, since I was getting old and I could die at any time, I did not have to worry about becoming infected. As a Christian, I was not afraid of death. I was only afraid of being paralyzed in bed; I would be unhappy and should not want to trouble my carers. I did not expect that my parents would be tearful and that my son would object to my intention so strongly. It would be a journey of no return. In the end, I gave up the idea, but I carried out a fundraising programme for the service. I admire Mother Teresa, who is so humble to demonstrate her selflessness and to serve in the poorest parts of the world.

Another matter that triggered my consideration to leave SBHK was the increasing turnover rate among volunteers. A number of the new volunteers were not the same kind of people as I was.

They learned the listening skills and left SBHK. They did not have a similar passion to serve people in need. It is a mixed feeling for me. On the one hand, I do not encourage volunteers to leave shortly after training. On the other hand, I considered that I could leave at any time, as it is only a voluntary service. Nevertheless, I followed the example of one volunteer and admired his perseverance to stay. However, some volunteers even want to be served, demanding more attention from the management of SBHK. This sort of phenomenon is quite discouraging to see.

In fact, I did think of leaving several times in the past twenty years. Year after year, I passed my annual appraisal and continued with the service. I have many friends who are either happy or unhappy, while I am in between. I am satisfied to have worked as a volunteer in an organization for a quarter of a century. Sometimes, I feel I am old and tired, and I wish to find a place to rest.

### **No more management work**

I did not take up any management role at SBHK, as there is more demand for frontline work. I have been a group leader twice, and now only want to participate in frontline duty. I do management work as my career and do not want to carry out a similar duty after work. Hence, I was encouraged by other members to stay and just to carry out the basic work of a volunteer, which is listening to calls – an adequate goal.

Besides, since volunteers in SBHK play a very significant role, there have been occasions when disagreements have arisen among different groups of volunteers with different management philosophies. In the event that such disagreements or political issues run to a dispute, the friendly relationships between volunteers would suffer. Under such a situation, I would consider leaving the service. However, I am still resilient in standing against such occasional negative feelings. My desire and commitment to serve remain intact, and allowed me to continue my volunteer role.

### **General lack of proper guidance to children**

I remember a call from a mother asking me how to prevent her daughter from cutting her wrist. During the conversation, the mother said that her daughter was cutting her wrist again and that she needed to terminate the call to attend to her. Although the conversation was not long, I was very surprised by such a phenomenon and at the lack of day-to-day care and advice that had led to such a difficult situation. I think that many children are not given guidance in life. As a result, they have poor life skills. Should there be more knowledgeable people around to guide children, they would be able to cope with life more easily. This would help to prevent many social problems.

I notice that there are clients who blame SBHK or even society for not listening to them. However, they lack an ability to reflect on how they have contributed to their own problems or how they exaggerate the problem. On one occasion, a mother complained that no one had helped her to settle her son's concern after crying at school. She considered that her son was being maltreated with bias from his fellow students – they had given her son a nickname and so on. I consider this to be overprotection of children. Children should develop an ability to solve this sort of childhood relationship problem by themselves. Parental intervention is unnecessary,

especially not to the extent of blaming others for not taking their side.

### **Clients beyond imagination**

There was another call from a man who was going to be married. However, he had a problem of not able to find anyone to be the official witness of his marriage. Again, I was very surprised to hear of someone getting married yet having no friend to assist him. I associate this situation with the norm of the Hotline service, where most clients are not able to find any friends or relatives to listen to them sharing. A hotline could serve to listen to him, but not be a witness at the wedding!

I confess that, before my duty, sometimes I imagine what kind of cases I am to receive. However, I would start to worry if I continued to guess. There might be a violent act, such as by people who sit on a rooftop yelling that they will jump. They might be speaking on the phone when they are about to commit suicide. I would not know how to handle such an overwhelming situation. I would not be happy to handle high-risk cases. Although I might appreciate it if I found that I was able to handle them properly, I might also feel incompetent if I could not persuade the client to save their life.

In fact, I always feel some incompetence in my life. Lives are so unpredictable and therefore people need meaning to continue to live. People accept the challenge of tomorrow, but do not know what tomorrow will bring. Under normal circumstances, volunteers would not cause a client to commit suicide during their conversation. Any undesirable impact from the volunteer on the client could have devastating consequences. If they could feel that there was a way to solve their problems, they would not carry out such an action. If I could not do what I wanted to do, I would be unhappy. However, the key point for me is to let the client understand that they are being listened to and are being respected by the volunteer.

## Chapter 4 – Polly Wong, a life dedicated to the dyslexic

*In 1986, soon after Polly graduated from secondary school, she needed to consider a career due to the economic situation of her family and the then limited university places for youngsters. Even without tertiary education, Polly decided to become a professional worker with an academic background. However, she did not have many choices. The following paragraphs describe her thoughts when looking back to the days when she joined SBHK...*

I knew that I might either join the police force, or become a teacher or nurse. With my understanding of my non-aggressive character, I rejected becoming a policewoman and, as I also considered myself incompetent to become a teacher, I left myself with no choice but to become a student nurse.

### **Recommended by Hotline member to join a caring service**

During that period, I had a friend who was a member of the Hotline volunteers at SBHK. The friend told me that the service in the Hotline was special and meaningful, and that I might be interested in joining.

Since I have been a Christian since my secondary schooldays, I follow the caring and loving principles as a Christian in all possible ways. Since becoming a nurse and a Hotline volunteer serve the same goal – to care for other people – the two tasks complement each other.

After I settled into my nurse training programme, I found that I had spare time to learn other things. Learning active listening as part of counselling skills was very attractive to me. I always thought that I could apply counselling skills in my nursing. Besides, the service in SBHK shed new light on another aspect of society. It is interesting to be involved in understanding the various situations of clients. I find my service on the Hotline to be beneficial to both my personal development and my job.

### **Helping others helps myself**

I summarize my experience on the Hotline as ‘helping others helps myself’, as I always find it beneficial, working there. When I listen to a client during a conversation, I find new enlightenment in my life. Through ongoing self-reflection, I learn many things that are helpful to my life. I discovered the magic of helping others at an early stage of volunteering. At the beginning of my service, I had a great many worries about how I had performed in the conversation and what I could provide to the clients. However, with more and more experience of handling calls, I learned a great deal about myself: my style of learning, my learning capacity, my performance and my limitations.

### **Skills to promote growth of clients and use available resources**

During my early stages as a Hotline worker, my attitude to clients was to listen to them more and to do less talking or questioning. Thus, listening skills can be acquired through experience. Over the years, I have changed my attitude to clients. I now acknowledge the need to apply

different skills to different clients, whether genuinely in need or manipulative, or nuisance sex callers. Workers could play a better role in handling them tactfully in order to solicit growth in the clients, no matter how small the window for growth.

Besides, I further acknowledge the need to couple skill in handling clients with the use of proper social resources. In particular, I notice the importance of resources in handling clients with marriage, parenting or mental health problems. In this area, SBHK provides many opportunities for me to learn about this through the various training sessions and visits to organizations.

### **Apprenticeship promotes group bonding**

I admit that my stay in the service is highly motivated by the cohesive group bonds of the team that I belong to. In the 1980s, new recruits were attached to a group as apprentices. They were allocated an experienced volunteer as their mentor, who organized role-play and listened to their handling of real cases with the help of other team members. That is why the bonds in the team were very strong. Any new recruit passing the year-long training programme became a good friend and team mate. My service has been very stable over the years. I used to report for duty every Thursday evening. Listening to calls and chatting with the team members are the norm.

### **More time was needed for my family**

I was sluggish in my service shortly after giving birth to my children. Sometimes I had to take a short leave and was not able to fulfil the minimum service requirement. When this happens, SBHK allows volunteers to commit to a reduced service frequency for the coming six months. This gives them some leeway in organizing their spare time and then to return to their normal requirement as before. Failing to fulfil this reduced frequency in the next half year would lead to the downgrading of worker membership to trainee membership.

One of my children was diagnosed with dyslexia in early childhood. This news meant that I had to spend more time with the child. With an increase in the need to take care of my children and the need to spare time for studying different courses from time to time, I set a low priority on the Hotline service and fulfilled only my minimum requirements for the service.

It is fortunate that I am fully supported by my husband, my mother and my sister. I have never felt alone in handling the parenting of the children, though there are inevitably some hard times, especially when the child is small. Though there are tensions in the family on parenting issues, my husband and I were eager to take good care of our children as our primary objective. My husband is considerate. He is willing to bear some of the domestic housework in order to spend more time on parenting. This also releases my tension about tackling the study problem of my children. It was stressful for us when the children were young.

### **Hotline can do more than palliative care**

Another interesting reason for my staying with SBHK is the nature of my work. I decided to pursue a nursing career in palliative or hospice care. The cases that I handle at work are generally terminal illness cases, in which patients do not have any hope of recovery. Instead, I

educate and convince the patients and their family members to do the best to respect the patients and their lives. The elderly people or patients with terminal illness still need to be respected, and they also need to respect themselves and their lives. I admit that I cannot do many things for them with regard to saving their lives, but I can help to promote their quality of life.

In the Hotline, I can use my skills to convince people to save their lives. Compared with my job in the hospice care service, the clients in the Hotline are less serious, as they are not at a stage of terminal illness. As such, I can do something that I cannot do at work. I really have a feeling of being able to help others. I feel satisfied if the client can reflect after our conversation. This is a feeling that I cannot have at work.

### **Consideration of social work**

Another side-story about my career development is that I thought about becoming a social worker rather than a nurse. My fellow volunteers in SBHK somehow influenced me on this idea. A nurse has no close contact with patients, and has no training in handling their emotions or moods. The active listening skills that I learned from SBHK in the early stage of my Hotline service made me decide to switch career. I joined a social work training course and explored ways to change jobs. After completing the course, I decided to stick with the nursing profession, but to focus on palliative and hospice care. I considered that such nursing work utilized my attention, mood, spirit and energy to treat patients. I could also apply counselling skills. I am required to react in multiple ways in my work.

### **Early practice of caring in the Christian church**

I cannot recall when I decided to help people. When I was a child, I was not particularly helpful at home, although I followed parental orders to do housework or handicrafts, such as assembling plastic flowers to earn some money for the family. However, my desire to interact with people was discovered by the priest at my Christian church. Despite the fact that I studied in a Catholic school, I followed a friend and joined a Christian church [sic: there is a popular notion that Christianity is always Protestantism]. I was assigned to lead a small group at church. It was interesting to interact with and help other people at church. The church gave me plenty of chances to love and to listen to others. I enjoyed the process of interacting with people and I gradually understood my own drive and initiative to do so. Perhaps this paved the way to my becoming a helping professional and volunteer on the suicide prevention Hotline.

### **Change of grouping affected my sense of belonging**

It has not always been easy for me to stay with the Hotline service, as I have other commitments in my life. However, since my husband is also a Hotline member, we can understand each other more and are mutually supporting. After the change of vertical grouping from seven groups (Mondays, Tuesdays, and so on) to horizontal grouping (based on mornings, afternoons, evenings and overnight groups), there are obvious deficiencies in terms of the cohesiveness of group members. In that period of initial change, I really thought of leaving the service and attended fewer gatherings of the new group. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm and stability of my husband in the service did encourage me to stay with him. We could share our

experience, whether we were in a good or bad mood. This is especially true after listening to nuisance sex callers or manipulative clients, when I could sometimes find myself in a helpless situation.

### **Reflection on high-risk cases**

Experience with high-risk clients does not motivate me to stay with the service. I recall that I once handled a woman with postnatal depression about ten years ago. It was her second baby. However, her husband was not responding well to her. She did not feel that there was any support from him. On one occasion, she contacted her husband for support. Instead, he asked his mother to attend to her. The woman was puzzled about the non-responsiveness of her husband and began to spiral down in her mood. She burned charcoal to poison herself after putting the two babies to bed. Such a situation demanded much intelligence from me. While I was worrying about the toxic environment, I had to maintain the conversation with the client, making a continuous assessment of the situation and keeping on persuading the client to allow me to call the police for assistance. With the indication from the client that she really did not want to die, I convinced her to open the window for ventilation and to check the condition of the two babies. With the unstable emotions of the client, I caught the precious moment of her hesitation to die and persuaded her to allow the police to help her.

While we were waiting for the police to come, her mother arrived. I immediately asked to talk to her and requested that she double-checked the condition of the babies. When the police arrived, I was much relieved from my earlier tension. The next day, I saw a big headline in the newspaper that the woman had been charged with homicide. After several months, I noticed that the woman had been found guilty in court, but was not given any sentence due to depression. I reflected a great deal on the completion of the case, despite being satisfied with my overall handling. I acknowledged and treasured the chance given to me to talk to the woman. I noted that I should have sought help from other volunteers to contact the police. It was fortunate that the children were saved, and I did help the client to escape from the door of death.

I bring with me an ordinary and calm mood when I report for duty at the Hotline. I just listen to calls. If there is not much suicide risk, such as chronic cases or repeat callers, I carry out the routine and finish a case without much elaboration. With the assistance of our Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC), I am relieved to refer high-risk cases to them so that our social workers can follow up the case. It is quite different from in the past, when I was very worried about what would happen after I hung up, and therefore could not hang up easily. Now, I feel the accomplishment of my task if I can convince the client to accept the SCIC service. Even after handling a high-risk case, I no longer desire to search through the newspaper the next day!

For me, even though I feel less worried after handling high-risk cases, I do not feel a lack of accomplishment. It is because there are still a large number of nuisance calls, such as calling for a lark or false calls, which defeat the enthusiasm of volunteers. There is some doubt about whether listening to these calls is actually just a waste of time, therefore handling a genuine high-risk case and referring it to SCIC still brings a feeling of accomplishment.



I think that it is not important whether handling nuisance calls is a waste of time or not, and I finish cases as usual. If I could have two genuine callers in a hundred cases, it would be acceptable. This is especially true if the two genuine callers are really in need of such information about social resources. I admit that it is uncertain whether I could meet the needs of every client. It may be that, if I respond to certain clients, I might give them a chance for some relief, but I am uncertain whether I can do the same for the next caller.

### **Training task as another frontline work**

I consider myself a frontline worker. I dislike administrative work; it is too troublesome for me. I prefer the simple life of handling phone calls. It would provide me with more satisfaction. Perhaps I have the ability for self-learning. I used to have a new revelation after casework. Therefore, I like to do frontline work. However, in recent years, now that my children are older, I have started to settle down. I completed a Master's degree course in counselling that was jointly run by the SBHK and Middlesex University, and thought that it was about time for me to assist in training. In the past, I preferred spending time with my children and listening to the Hotline to extra work such as training new volunteers.

I can feel my change of thought. After I completed the Master's degree in counselling, I felt that I had a better grasp of various counselling skills. With more knowledge, I understand that I have more options in my approach, which results in a more fruitful experience with clients. I acknowledge more and more the importance of sharing my experience. Since I have benefited from serving in SBHK, I hope that I can contribute more to assisting new members. As the turnover rate for volunteers is still high, it is best to retain the steady volunteers or provide them with more input during training. It would promote their sense of belonging and wanting to stay with SBHK. If I could share more experiences with new members and if they could benefit from them, there would be more trained workers to listen to calls and so more clients would be benefited. That is why I am making available more time to assist in training, especially on case supervision and in leading recruits for role-play activities.

### **Reflection on chronic cases**

One case which influenced me is about a woman with emotional problems who contacted SBHK twenty years ago. In the past, SBHK appointed a volunteer to follow up chronic clients. I was assigned that woman, who was aged about twenty years. The client's emotional problem made her to feel sick all the time. She was not able to work. She needed medication, but she did not trust doctors or social workers. She complained that she was being shunted around by her social workers.

At the beginning, the client was willing to talk to me. However, when we were talking about her core issues, she was reluctant to change. Perhaps she once had had a little change, but she then felt that such little effort would not make any progress. She then stopped all the progress and remained at her unhappy stage of life. She hid in her house. She quarreled with her mother frequently. She complained about and criticized everything. She called various hotlines frequently and met social workers. Basically, she was ruminating in her mind with her bad

feelings and delaying dealing effectively with her case.

We talked for about two years, and later the woman stopped calling me. In those days, SBHK aimed to dissuade these callers from contacting the Hotline too often, and were told to phone the same volunteer once every one or two weeks. In this way, the worker responsible could review what had happened to the clients each time and what would happen next.

The woman was a typical client with emotional illness. She felt that people were blaming her. She had no friends. Even friends on the internet gave her a deal of trouble, which made her very unhappy. I did not see any positive progress in her. I felt helpless in facing this client. It was difficult to find some positive issue to encourage her to move forward. She kept on marking time at the same location. I really felt pity for her. She was just young and she made good handicrafts. During one interview, the client gave me one of her handmade products. However, she made no progress over the years.

I felt sorry not to be able to help this kind of client. In fact, I volunteered to take up the case. My original thought had been to provide a consistent approach by one worker with one client, so that her progress could be easily monitored. Thus, a recovery plan could be carried out with an agreed goal. This seemed better than allowing different volunteers to listen to a single case using various approaches, directions or skills, and the chance of helping the client to change would be greater.

#### **The Hotline should not follow up cases**

However, with the experience of this client, my thoughts changed. I revisited the case and concluded that the aim of the Hotline service is to help clients at a time when they have fluctuating emotions or suicidal thoughts. Instantly calming down their bad emotions is the entry point, if necessary transferring the clients to other agencies for further assistance. However, if the client's emotion has been handled properly by volunteers and they can continue with their life, there is no such a need for the Hotline service to follow up on them. A hotline is not a professional counselling service. It would not be possible for me or other volunteers to follow up the case. This is simply not its concept. In retrospect, I am confident that the service should carry out instant emotion counselling, and that there is no need to assign volunteers to follow up any case. A hotline should not follow up cases.

#### **Special call to help parents who have children with learning difficulties**

Apart from SBHK, I have been one of the volunteers for the St Christopher's Home for Children. I visit the children there and take them for outings. I also carry out voluntary service as a nurse to deliver health talks or to measure blood pressure. Since 2011, I have also been a volunteer of the Hong Kong Association for Specific Learning Disabilities. This is a service that I long to join. However, due to the clash of the training classes with my shift work, I was unable to attend the training until I changed my duties in 2011. It is a mission for me, as I am empathetic to other parents with children with learning disabilities. While I managed to guide my child to secondary school, I had to overcome many difficulties yet, although he is still finding it hard to study, the most difficult time for me has passed. I understand the challenge ahead for parents with similar

children. They might not accept the fact or they might not know how to bring them up. There is a need to help these frustrated parents and therefore I want to staff their hotline.

### **No learned skills can help my parenting**

Although I have benefited considerably from my Hotline experience, it is not sufficient to handle my child. While my nursing, social work and counselling training are in some ways training in how to communicate or how to handle problems, they provide little help, especially with self-awareness, for me in facing my child. Frankly, when my child presents me with an unimaginably poor academic result or when they cannot learn after much effort has been made, my anger is overwhelming. I have many such emotional experiences. I need to learn how to control my emotion or even to learn how to let go of my expectations. I would not force my child to fulfil my expectations, and need to avoid any direct confrontation and provide more encouragement instead. I have taken a related course and read books on how to help my child with their disability. My Hotline experience is not compatible with this aspect. Parenting is really another topic, and it is so very different from hotline counselling.

### **Unique training for suicide prevention**

I think that to train a group of volunteers to handle suicidal cases is a brave act. Most social service agencies dare not do so. They deploy social workers to support or take over. When a new volunteer needs to handle a suicidal client, the volunteer would be worried and at a loss to know how to do so. In retrospect, I think that the training by SBHK is comprehensive and it takes nearly a year to complete. Many resources are deployed to foster the ability of the volunteers to handle critical cases. Even trainees who originally are not eager to learn can be benefited.

The training really provides the necessary skills for the volunteers to help those people who are suicidal, or are at a loss and do not know who to turn to. The role for the volunteer to support those people who phone for genuine help is special. It would be worthwhile even if only one in a thousand callers could start to think seriously through talking to our volunteers. It is meaningful, as life is precious. Now the SCIC regularly supports Hotline volunteers, and it reduces the pressure on volunteers, who can easily hand over cases to crisis workers. It has become a more perfect and comprehensive service for suicidal clients, despite the fact that much effort has to be made to maintain it around the clock.

### **Special appreciation to the volunteers on Overnight Duty (OND)**

I appreciate that OND is very important, as not many agencies can provide an around-the-clock telephone hotline. After midnight, the emotions of people in need can fluctuate wildly. Having someone to listen is already a great support to them. I appreciate very much the volunteers on OND. It is not easy to take overnight calls, as it disrupts regular sleep patterns.

### **Focus on frontline work**

I am a wanderer in SBHK, but I care about its development. Sometime I have commented on certain phenomena, but I have not been too much involved in them as I am not a person who likes to handle administrative issues. I love frontline work. I criticize Exco or the one in charge of the centre when certain new policies are introduced. However, my criticism is piecemeal, as I do

not like to drag out this sort of matter. I focus my efforts on the service. Administrative nuisance does not affect my stay in SBHK, although I realize that some volunteers might leave if they were discontented about such administrative matters.

I will remain in the service as it is a meaningful task. If the adversity of administrative issues is too extreme, I would really feel unhappy about serving the organization. I love the meaningful service. I also recognize that there is room for further development. However, as far as possible, I would let Exco focus on development issues.

### **Relatively high turnover rate**

I have become used to seeing relatively high turnover rates, with people moving in and out, whether staff or volunteers. If new recruits do not really understand what it is going on, they will somehow be affected by the frequent movements of people. However, it has no impact on me. I understand the difficulty for staff in staying for an extended period with the Hotline, due to the lack of promotion opportunities. The turnover of volunteers is even more difficult to control. That is why some better developments are needed. The high turnover of staff could affect the training of volunteers. Staff is a key factor in bonding between volunteers, especially new recruits.

### **Upgrade facilities**

I think that there are a number of improvements that could help to reduce the turnover rate and provide a better working environment for staff and volunteers. For instance, the existing telephone system is too old. There is no computer in the telephone booth to assist in the search for information. Using a manual for searching is really outdated. More updated technology could be used for searching. The Exco should think more about integration of the various centres. Such a development could help the working environment to be more supportive of volunteers. With so much effort on training, members leave because these environmental factors are a waste of effort. It would be better if two to three devoted volunteers could stay for each training class. I understand that there are many reasons why volunteers and staff leave. Some of them are difficult to address. However, improvements to the physical environment could be considered. More support and security for the OND volunteers and staff could possibly extend their stay.

### **Experiencing life with clients**

In conclusion, I was young and naïve when I first joined the Hotline. There were many things that I did not know at the beginning. Through the Hotline service, I have learned a great deal. Clients of varying social status and background have shown me the conflict in their lives. These are valuable lessons. When I was young, I fully agreed with the idea of 'helping others helps myself'. Dealing with clients, I understand what life experience can be. There are certain people in distress in society who are experiencing difficulties and helplessness, yet some of them face their problem positively.

### **Changes in the type of caller reflects the changes in the society**

I have witnessed some major changes in different eras. There was a time when the city was

clouded with the issue of pathological gamblers; there were periods when the stock market was on a rollercoaster; there were times when extra-marital affairs among men or unemployment were really common. Different trends in culture in society are reflected by the incoming calls. Sometimes, I recognize the problems of certain groups of people. This insight could not be readily obtained from any other organization.

It is a personal growth process to communicate with the clients. I have accumulated listening skills and have more confidence in handling different cases. I reflect, after listening to calls, such as on how I could do better. I understand that it is not a matter of saying whether I was successful in handling a case. What I mean is that, when I am confident, I hope that I can help the clients. However, I keep reminding myself not to be overconfident or to make premature judgments. Sometimes I think that I made a conclusion too early, which affects my patience for listening more carefully to clients, as active listening is really very important in the Hotline service.

### **Volunteers are genuine and authentic friends**

I cannot deny that the Hotline service also allowed me to come to know my husband. He is also a Hotline volunteer and is a good husband. SBHK has given me a new family and a good husband. He always has a positive appraisal of me. It is a marvelous arrangement that I could become acquainted with my husband at the Hotline. We started by mutually encouraging each other. It is similar with other volunteers whom I know in the service. Although the chance for volunteers to meet during the service is not high, we can chat frankly when we do meet. It is difficult to find similar friendships in other social settings. The volunteers are genuine and authentic friends who serve SBHK wholeheartedly.

## Chapter 5 – Joyce Chow, the nature follower

*Joyce saw a newspaper advertisement from SBHK in 1986 and was attracted by the words 'suicide prevention'. Therefore, she applied to be a volunteer. She describes herself as the kind of person who likes to try new things. However, once she has attempted them, she might not continue with them. There were many other examples of this sort from her, for instance learning rock climbing, canoeing and so on. She completed the training yet did not continue with these sports. Apart from her drive to try new things, during the interview she recalled another possible reason for joining SBHK....*

### **Guilty feeling for own inaction**

In retrospect, I remembered another side-story that might be related to my joining SBHK. I was once a teacher at a secondary school. Although I left the profession after two years, I continued to have gatherings with my students after I had left the school. Two years before I joined SBHK, I was told by one of my former colleagues that one of the students had committed suicide. My immediate reaction to this tragic incident was a feeling of guilt. I felt guilty that I had not dealt with the problem of this student, as it was known to me at the time when I was teaching there. However, I had not been trained in counselling and was only five or six years older than the student. I avoided handling her emotional fragility. I was afraid to get in touch with her inner feelings. The news of her death immediately made me think what I could have done to help her. If I had possibly tried to handle her emotions, could the tragedy have been avoided? There was a guilty feeling in my mind, even though that student had been expelled from the school.

### **Feeling incompetent to serve**

Without my being aware of my unfinished business with the deceased student, I was accepted to be a Hotline volunteer after training. During the first year in the Hotline, I found myself in an awkward position. I did not feel competent to use the skills that I had learned. I had the feeling of being defeated in handling cases. I also found it difficult to use the skills. I remembered that the first case that I had handled was a sexual harassment case. Right up to now I can still remember the details of the case and how ineffectively I dealt with the client. I felt angry with the client, and had not dealt with the situation adequately. I thought that I had just passed the qualifying test for the volunteer by a narrow margin, and I discovered that this was true when I read the comments on of my test record several years after I joined the service.

### **Feeling inferior and isolated**

Besides, I am not a social person. It was difficult for me to mix with my group of volunteers who mainly reported to duty on Tuesdays. I had difficulty in sharing experiences with my peers or more senior volunteers. This was especially the case when I was given comments, or exercised too much care with outreach clients. During that period, Hotline volunteers would occasionally proceed to hospital to handle someone who had attempted suicide or had been saved from committing suicide. In other words, my work was not appreciated by other volunteers. My feeling was that of an orphan in my group. I was isolated, like nobody's child. I had no sense of belonging and could not mix socially with others. I was pessimistic. My inferiority nearly drove

me to resign.

Coincidentally, one of the group leaders during that time, Mr Yim, asked me to be the secretary of the group leaders' meeting. I accepted the task, not knowing how it would affect my whole life.

### **One move that changed her life**

As the secretary of the group leaders' meeting, I began to become involved in the more administrative aspects of SBHK and in less in the casework. In fact, I became more and more interested in running SBHK. The next year, I volunteered to be an Exco member. As the Exco election took place every two years, I experienced several posts: public relations officer, publishing officer, training officer and vice-chairperson.

Interestingly, I discovered that, with more exposure to the administration and management work of SBHK, my skill in handling cases also increased. I realized that, while I was representing SBHK as a spokesperson or as trainer, I needed to understand the kind of service that SBHK was offering to the public. With more and more experience and thought in this area, I had different insights into the service that SBHK was providing. Such insights increased with more and more training courses or talks. In fact, the management post provided me with a new chance to reflect on my listening skills. I was able to improve my listening skills. I gradually found that I could handle clients in a better way. I had my new insight into how I could be empathetic with clients. My feelings of inferiority gradually faded. I know that if I had not carried out non-case related work, I would not have stayed so long at SBHK. This is very true, as it is my norm to set aside a subject after I have learned it! Canoeing and rock climbing are typical examples.

### **Writing instead of caring**

It was as if I found my personal strengths in SBHK. The management and administrative work was more suitable for me than purely applied active listening skills. I did not consider myself good enough at communication skills. This was the reason why I had not been a group leader in my first twenty years at the Hotline. Initiating care for someone else, as SBHK expects of group leaders, is not my forte. Listening and verbal communication are not my talents. By contrast, I am good at written communication. That is why I was keen to be the public relations officer and the publishing officer. During those days, I published the SBHK's annual report, the annual guidance handbook for Form 5 graduates and another booklet, *No Wasteful Days* (沒有白過的日子). Similarly, I found myself suitable for public relations work, especially in handling media enquiries. I found my personal strength. Something belonged to me.

### **Understanding the subconscious drive to rectify deficiencies**

Now I could easily explain what had happened to me. It is my personality or character. I am not a person who can offer care to others. However, due to my unnoticed, unfinished business with the late student, I had joined SBHK to try to rectify my own deficiencies. However, I was not able to change my character to carry out caring work just by learning the theory. Instead, I decided to follow the path that led to management work in SBHK. I consider running SBHK to be of equal importance as manning the frontline services. Training, publishing and promotional work are all

activities that promote suicide prevention.

However, notwithstanding my personality conflict with caring, I am not satisfied with my caring skills. In order to better equip me to face the media or other public forums as representative of SBHK, I continued to study. In five years' time, I obtained a Bachelor degree in psychology and a Master's degree in counselling. These have provided me with the right materials and confidence to face the public when discussing suicide or counselling issues.

### **Devoted to OND**

In 1997, I left the executive committee and focused on staying with the OND of the Hotline. I enjoy OND, as the night-long duty provides a more relaxed environment for the counsellor. It has fewer time constraints than daytime duty, when volunteers might wish to leave on time for their next appointment. There are also fewer repeat callers and more workable clients. I feel job satisfaction on most OND shifts when I notice that clients have benefited from the conversation.

### **Application of Buddhist concepts**

In 2011, I rejoined Exco to oversee the Hotline and to maintain my minimum commitment to OND. In fact, I began a new page in my time on OND in late 2011 after I had spent two years learning about Indian Buddhism. Without coming into conflict with the helping principles of SBHK of not actively using religion as a tool, I added to my personal insight in handling clients. I might apply several concepts such as 'living here and now' and 'everything comes from your heart', which are in fact 'how you look at the world (things or people), and how such a world affects your thoughts and emotions'.

I recall a celebrity monk's speech, in which he asked three questions:

- (1) When is the most important time?
- (2) Who is the most important person?
- (3) What is the most important thing?

His answers were (1) now, (2) the one in front of you, and (3) caring. They are the basic elements of counselling. With my improvement in sitting meditation, I find myself with more sensitivity in grasping all these concepts when communicating with clients. With my strong personal belief in Buddhism, I now find more satisfaction in the frontline service. I attribute this again to how I feel inwardly. I am applying myself, rather than principles. I have become more flexible in various ways. I could apply the concept more in my daily life and see things from another person's angle. While I avoid lingering on things in the past, now I acknowledge my awareness of those things. I admit that I am still searching for direction. I need more time to understand the holistic concept.

### **Dispersing seeds for clients' change**

I remember in 2011 a client with mental illness who complained endlessly of the meaningless of the life cycle: everyone becomes old and dies. His mother had left him. He became old and would eventually die. It was meaningless to him. When I questioned if he would feel sad when seeing a flower wither, or if he would feel sad when it rained after seeing the sun, he paused



and started to think. Although he resumed complaining about the world, I considered that I had put a seed of an idea in his mind. It was something that might stimulate him to reconsider his attitude later.

With this approach, I find that more and more clients actually express their gratitude to me. They thank me for the conversation that gave them insight. The 'here and now' concept helps repeat callers to reflect on the ideas that they hold and their broken hearts, such as an abandoned lover, to reassess how they have been living in the past and what causes their unhappiness. I recognize that there has been a positive change in my perception and sensitivity which allows me to see more chances to reflect on relevant concepts with clients, and this often changes the result of the conversation.

### **Follow fate to serve in SBHK**

If I felt it was right to leave SBHK, I would do so. As no one knows about the future, I cannot tell if that will happen. However, perhaps I will not leave SBHK so long as I can take the overnight shift! For me, it is best for me to take the overnight shift, although it is tough. To take two hours travelling time for a two-and-a half-hour daytime duty is too demanding, for me. Taking on the overnight shift is more beneficial in terms of travelling time. However, I also admit to a drop in physical strength nowadays; I can no longer drive my car to report for OND, although I can go shopping afterwards. Anyway, life is difficult for me and I might not ignore a chance to leave.

### **Organization life cycle: born, old, sick and die**

When commenting on SBHK, I say that it is like human beings having a destiny. There are four stages of life: birth, becoming old, sickness and death. Humans have a life cycle that we cannot escape from. Organizations also have a life cycle. I left the Exco before, as I thought that I was not capable of pushing the organization forward any more.

I knew in the past that some Exco members were conservative and did not want to introduce much change to SBHK. In fact, I quit because I thought that there was a need for new ideas and for people to develop the organization, otherwise it would 'die' naturally in my hand. Although some senior members commented that I was not doing my own job, I felt that it is a natural phenomenon to be replaced, and that new developments would not stop. Since SBHK believes that volunteers could run the organization, it would be unfortunate if members were of a low quality. Human have to face birth, becoming old, sickness and death; once the time arrives, we have to go. The development of SBHK really depends on people, but it still seems like a human life cycle. However, luck always has a role.

### **Follow the natural order**

When I rejoined the Exco in 2011, I initially really wanted to quit. I found a mismatch between myself and other Exco members. It was like walking along two roads. However, as I came to understand more about the character of different members and with my internal drive to rectify many issues within the service and not to allow things to deteriorate, I remained in my position. I tried my best to fix the issues, although they still depended on many other factors. I am not pessimistic, but it is a natural order. No matter how well the organization functioned in the past,

it still has a date by which it will end. It is natural.

I do not understand why I responded to the recruitment advertisement to join SBHK, although I had experienced the death of my past student, and admit that this could be a potential reason. In fact, my family objected to my joining SBHK and questioned why I wanted to carry out this kind of service and devote so much time to it. My friends also questioned me. However, I believe that as long as SBHK checks me out with the tests, there is no harm in me serving.

### **Learning changed my life**

My character always allows me to try new things. I once learned geomancy. However, as soon as I completed the learning, I never took it up again. I also learned fortune telling. However, I discovered that there were some areas which were not covered. I left it aside. The same pattern applies to many other things that I learn. After I understand it, I do not bother about it anymore and forget it. May be it is the same exploratory attitude that drove me to join SBHK. It could be my fate that I learn the skills and then leave. From a Buddhist angle, it is fate. There is something there and that's why I follow it. It happens repeatedly, in my learning of rock climbing, canoeing and rowing as well. Once I get the certificate, I do not play the sport anymore.

To me, it is fate that brought me to SBHK, and which changed my life. In my company, I could not always look for justice, trust or passion. I could not know my own strength if I did not join SBHK. SBHK has allowed me to try new things continually. I would feel that I was just an ordinary person if I had not joined the service, and I would not fight for my own promotion in the company as an outstanding person!

### **I chose my position**

I would still feel comfortable if I was to retire from my company as a junior staff member. I am happy to have had more exposure and to know my own strength. Although I have remained at a similar level or grade in my company for thirty years, I do not think that I am inferior to others. It is the position that I chose. I would not seek promotion or remain at a junior level. I am in a lower middle position, in which I feel most comfortable. At this level, I do not need to face survival or politics every day. Many of my colleagues are already at managerial level, but they have to face this kind of problem. That is why I would not feel sad about my present position. I understand my strengths and I am happy to stay at the level that I chose.

### **Self-understanding**

Neither do I bother how other people regard me. I have my own self-esteem. This is unlike some other people, who really mind how others view them. Only how I look at myself is important; others' values towards me are not important. My company knows my attitude on not proceeding to any higher position. Believe it or not, I really did ask my boss not to promote me!

I have my own values. I can do what I want to do in my spare time. I can leave my office on time and do not need to bring any work home. I do not seek reputation or to maintain any interest. A

minimal lifestyle is sufficient for me.

If I did not understand my abilities, I might not opt to stay in my current position. Perhaps I might still say that I did not want to be awarded any promotion. However, I fully understand my own ability. I might be overconfident and push myself until such a time as I would know how much I could proceed upstream. I could only know when I was there.

At SBHK, I understand what I can do. I know what I have been doing in the past and at present. I understand what I have done. Without my experience in SBHK, I could only estimate my abilities. Even if I say that I am stable in my position, I might still question my own ability or why I am not outstanding in my performance. Subsequently, I might become depressed. Now, I do not have that bad feeling.

### **Case experience fosters self-awareness**

The casework in the Hotline has allowed me to improve my self-awareness through listening to others' life experience. With more self-awareness, I have improved my sensitivity to the issues around me. Everyone's life is so different from mine. I could even learn from the chronic situation of my staff when I need to provide regular support and care. Every case could bring me a greater degree of sensitivity. I could see things differently. I would look at the surrounding people and incidents with sensitivity and value. Thus, I learn how to face my life from others and ultimately change my own life. With a whole life approach to the 'here and now' and the nourishing experience at work and at SBHK on sensitivity and value, I now see things from a better perspective and do not look at why things happened.

### **Ugly self with no patience at home**

Having said that, there was a period when I felt that I had a tutored personality when listening to calls. When I returned home and faced my family members, I acted in my own way, which was different from how I acted at the Hotline. I used to question myself why I could not exercise similar patience with my family members. It was like a split personality. Why I could treat other people in one way, but family members in another way? I know that many people have a similar experience. Now I accept this. Perhaps it is my immanent drive that does not want me to alter my personality at home. It is not about whether something was right or wrong. I was what I was at that time.

Besides, I felt emotion when facing family members, as other experiences with them come to the surface. It is me. I have internal struggles and criticisms against myself. I feel dissatisfaction with myself and question why I can exercise patience outside of my family but not at home. In retrospect, I could not accept myself. That is, I considered that my true, natural and untutored self was much uglier than my tutored self.

### **Emptiness brought suicide thoughts**

My mother had dementia and my father had depression, and I had to face these issues alone. At an early stage, they were not diagnosed. I just needed to handle their bad temper. It was tough for me. I did not understand why I could not respond to my parents in the same way in which I

listened to clients. I really could not. It was like torture to me. I was being critical of myself by asking why I could not do it. In fact, my mother was always on the waiting list to go to a home for the elderly. When she was admitted in 2002, my father volunteered to go as well. It was a quite sudden shock that both my parents went to the home for the elderly. After settling them there, I went for a vacation to Japan. When I returned home, the house was empty. There were no parents or domestic helper. The emptiness at home enlightened and helped me to understand why people wish to commit suicide. However, I knew that I should not think in that direction.

### **Awakening brought enlightenment**

While my parents were at home, I stayed in my room and did not bother them. When I was alone at home, my emotions were running up and down. It was like a click in my mind. I understand why people have suicidal thoughts during that period of emptiness. It is lucky that, due to so much experience in SBHK, I understood what was happening to me. Fortunately, I was aware of what a dangerous situation it was. At the same moment, I escaped from the trap. It was like a feeling of being reborn. It was a very strange feeling that I can still remember clearly. It enlightened me to understand why people have suicidal thoughts in adversity. So, I admit that SBHK really helped me to come out from this kind of negative thought.

It was in 1998 when I left Exco and focused on OND. In fact, for those ten years that I was not an Exco member, I faced up to sending my parents to a home for the elderly in 2002 and the subsequent passing away of my father. OND was good for me. I isolated myself. I am very independent. Fortunately, I am strong enough.

### **Being a client helped me to understand counselling**

When I was studying counselling, I was depressed when working on my final project. I chose to be counselled as a client and needed to write about my feelings as a client. I wrote what happened in the counselling room, including what the counsellor told me and my reaction to the conversation. I also needed to write down how I would respond if I were in that position, as a counsellor. Through this, I recognized my problem when I was a client. I also understood the importance of listening during the process. I learned that, when I talked about my true feelings, I was very depressed and it was difficult to express myself clearly. I cried. When the session was over and the counsellor asked me to leave, I kept on crying all the time that I was driving 40 km home to Tung Chung, because I had not finished venting my emotion. From this, I knew that if I did anything that was not good enough, my client's feelings would be bad. The feeling was strong in my mind when I was in a client role; therefore I understood how important the role of a proper counsellor is. This learning experience was very helpful to me. Being a client, I knew what was lacking in my emotional vent. The counsellor might not have touched my heart nor had no resonance with me. I might not reach that level of emotional arousal for a healthy recovery. Since the counsellor could not do it, I could only achieve it on my own. During the process, a counsellor might bring the client to a certain point but not the right position, due to time restrictions. If there were only ten minutes left, the counsellor needed to hold the process until the next session. However, the client might not reach the same arousal level at the next session. It would be a knot, in which things would be stuck. When my emotion came and was

stopped abruptly, the client would have felt that it difficult to come through the situation. In this case, clients can only try to help themselves to continue the process with the counsellor. The counselling process was a good learning lesson. Those ten years were a good training opportunity for me.

### **The nature healed me**

I was sometimes very frustrated by the frequent quarrels between my parents. As a daughter, I was not able to settle their disputes. Under such circumstance, I preferred to spend some time in the countryside. About fifteen years ago, in the miserable family atmosphere, when I was sitting quietly in the balcony of a holiday bungalow, I had a strange experience. It was a very hot day with a blue sky and white clouds. While I was reading there about an hour before sunset, I suddenly heard clearly the sound of two birds singing happily on a branch of a big tree in front of the balcony. At that particular moment, the golden sun ray shone a spotlight at the birds. With the light wind stirring the leaves gently, a beautiful, golden picture appeared before me. At that moment, I found myself dissolving into the picture. A strong feeling of tranquility and happiness fell on me. It was a feeling of happiness, and life was so wonderful.

Another, similar experience occurred after ten years when I was hiking at Lantau Peak. No other hiker was there. When I had a rest halfway up, I turned my head and saw the amazing panoramic view of the Shek Pik Reservoir under the clear blue sky. In less than a second, I suddenly felt myself turned to be like a minute speck in the centre of a spiraling swirl. In a split second, I totally dissolved into the mother of nature inside the scene with trees around, sea and reservoir below, and blue sky above interwoven with each other in harmony. At that very moment, I had a feeling of how small a human was. It was just like a dust speck. Nothing and no one in the world was significant. Happiness or sorrows were just like clouds that came and were gone without an eternity in nature. A calling from nature echoed: JUST LET GO! I did not label the two incidents immediately after their occurrence. However, with more Buddhism knowledge that I have acquired in recent years, I would describe that I was in a state of mindfulness, a stage of selflessness and extreme joy when the experience came.

In fact, I had a similar experience after I advanced my knowledge in Buddhism. On an occasion when I was practising the Amitabuddha mantra with a group of Buddhists, I closed my eyes on reciting the mantra and, at that particular moment, I found myself dressed like a lama sitting on a snowy mountain practising the mantra. I could see each word of the mantra come out like an unbroken chain in Tibetan calligraphy from my mouth and fly up to the sky. There was again no sensation of either happiness or sadness. I was dissolved into the white snow and linked with everything in the world, in peace and tranquility.

### **Here and now**

My mother passed away in April 2014. She had been on a stomach feed since December 2013. I knew that she would pass away at any time, as she was getting weak and was already ninety-three. The times when she was conscious were becoming fewer. She just looked at the ceiling

without any facial expression, words or awareness at those people around her. The stomach feed, five times daily on milk, just prolonged her unnecessary pain and I started to doubt what quality of life an old person could have. I had mixed feelings: I was sad to see her suffering from weakness and time was running short for us to stay close together. However, I was also glad to know she would be 'leaving' soon.

The idea of the 'here and now' that alerted me and I had to cherish every moment that I could to touch her, hug her and kiss her. Sometimes, she would look at me deeply and it was as if she wanted to tell me what was on her mind. There might be a 'goodbye' message that she wanted to pass on to me – I guessed.

After almost five months in and out of the hospital, she passed away silently in the middle of the night without the nurses being aware. Probably, she did not want us to see her departing. Though I really believe that I was well prepared for the moment and would not have much sorrow at her funeral, I attempted to observe if there was any suppressed grief inside me. All my close friends worried about me, as they all knew that I loved my mother so much. Days went by, and on the day according to traditional Chinese belief when her soul would return to bid the last farewell to her loved ones, I felt her coming to my bedside and to be close to me. However, before I finished my wholehearted words of missing her, she flew away – just like a flash of lightning.

As a Buddhist, I know that she is totally released from all associations to her past life and is totally free from karma and reincarnation. But as the beloved daughter who has lived with her for decades, I feel really hurt and just like an orphan, deserted and on the earth alone.

For the first three months after her death, I had no interest in joining any social gatherings or reporting for SBHK service. I brought a camera and started to hike or drive to country parks alone to see the sunrise or the sunset on holidays or after work. It is form of natural healing, exactly as I recommend to my clients before: death is just a part of the natural cycle, and I love the colourful clouds at dawn or after sunset. I am totally absorbed by nature when I start to take pictures.

I also attended some meditation workshops, and one of them deeply inspired me. The meditation master from Palm Village said that our emotion is just a habitual reaction that we have learned since our birth. We are taught by adults or we imitate those around us in our childhood how to react to things, including our mind and feelings. Our stirring emotion is just a pre-programmed reaction. We are cheated, as we are not really living, but are habituated. Suddenly, I heard laughter inside me:

we let go of the whole framework of grasping. We accomplish this not by suppressing our desires, our aversions, our fixations, or trying to 'think differently', but rather by turning our awareness inward, examining the thoughts, emotions, and sensations that trouble us, and beginning to notice them – and perhaps even appreciate them... as expressions of awareness itself.

(Yongey Minguyur Rinpoche, 'In Joyful Wisdom', 2009: 86)

After four months, I 'reactivated' myself to gather with friends and resumed my duty at SBHK.

## Chapter 6 – Bonnie Wong, the generous helper

### **Attracted by flexible service hours**

*Bonnie just wanted to carry out some voluntary work to contribute to society when she joined SBHK in 1987. Although Bonnie did not have any particular idea of joining SBHK or any other charitable organization, she was attracted by the recruitment advertisement about the flexible hours of service. She responded to the advertisement and joined the SBHK Hotline. She considered herself very lucky to be able to join SBHK, as she did not have confidence to go through all the training and selection stages. What follows is the sharing by Bonnie about her simple and generous helping attitude in life....*

### **Sponsoring an orphan**

I am a physically and mentally healthy person and I wish to share my 'good' things and my time with my clients. By 'good' things, I mean the fact that I am not an unfortunate person, compared with others. I felt satisfied with my status when I was young.

In fact, in retrospect, I think that even before I joined SBHK I had a strong desire to help other people. I can hardly remember some of the experiences. I had sponsored an orphan for five years at Po Leung Kuk, one of the well-established orphanages in Hong Kong, before I joined the Hotline. It was not an adoption, and I paid monthly fees to sponsor the little girl and could visit her regularly. Now, I have forgotten the name of the girl. However, I remember that she was short-sighted. Her intellectual ability was limited. I only know that her parents abandoned her due to the shortcomings in her intelligence. Notwithstanding this, I often took her for outings. I treated her as my daughter and played with her.

On one occasion, I took a friend to visit my 'daughter' at Po Leung Kuk in order to let my friend see how there are more unfortunate people in the world. The visit was fruitful for my friend, as he thought that she was more fortunate and that she should not be so pessimistic about life.

### **Helping neighbour for five years**

When I was 15, I lived in a government housing estate in Kowloon. There I came across another girl of my age who had come to Hong Kong from Mainland China. The girl was living in another building in the estate. She was smart academically and was able to be admitted to a very reputable secondary school on Hong Kong Island. However, her parents were not very supportive of her. They said to her that she needed to take her younger siblings to primary school before she could go to her secondary school. It was difficult for the girl to do so, as the travelling time to Hong Kong Island meant that she had to leave home very early and she could never manage to take her siblings to school first. When I heard of this, I promised to accompany her siblings to school so that she could study at the good school. As a result, I took the children to school every day for the following five years. The girl afterwards was admitted to a university in Taiwan. I only saw her on a few occasions. Of course, the girl was very thankful to me, but we did not have contact for many years. Perhaps I am such a frank and open person that I hardly remembered this story until this interview.



### **Reflective comparison**

In my secondary school life, I encountered another female schoolmate who had a scar between her eyebrows. The scar was caused by her father during an incident of domestic violence. The schoolmate was very depressed and unhappy all the time. She always hid from other students. I tried many times to pacify her, but was not successful. Her mother was a popular hawker, selling all kinds of snacks but who, unfortunately, later had a stroke and became paralyzed. Although I was not in contact with her after school, I heard of the tragic news about them: At the age of 30, this schoolmate was too tired of taking caring of her paralyzed mother. She poisoned her to death and then committed suicide by hanging herself. It was a shock to me to learn about this, but it further enhances my idea that I am a fortunate person in comparison with many other people in society. I am highly satisfied with my past and present life.

### **My mother saved me from the loophole of learned helplessness**

Although I am mentally healthy, my childhood was not uneventful. My mother was an adopted daughter. I am the eldest of my siblings. However, being a female and having similar treatment as my mother, I did not receive very good attention from my grandmother who lived with us. My grandmother only treated the men and boys well. Fortunately, given this maltreatment from my grandmother, my mother was very much aware of the consequences of such behaviour. Without falling into the trap of any typical learned helplessness of a female in a masculine society and becoming depressed, she decided to treat her own children better. As a result, she gave us plenty of freedom. I was free to do many things during my childhood. I could play in the street. I had my own friends, and enjoyed very good relationships with my younger sisters and brothers.

### **Witnessing how my father strived for business**

Since the home environment was not appropriate for the whole family to live together, when I was six I moved out to stay with my father until I was twelve. That move left only my mother and my other siblings to live with our grandparents. I witnessed how my father tried to run a number of catering-related businesses but in vain. He opened a bakery and cake shop to sell bread and moon cakes. He set up company to provide an outreach banquet service. My father was not a good businessman and it ended with the collapse of all his businesses.

### **Stay in SBHK for friendship, client and pacing with the society**

Despite my independent character, I attribute three reasons for my staying such a long time in SBHK. These are friendship, clients, and keeping pace and being updated in the latest changes of the society.

I have always considered myself lucky to be able to join SBHK. I made friends with many volunteers during my Hotline service. The friends in SBHK were so different from my other friends at work. Volunteers in SBHK are more genuine with each other. Volunteers can share among themselves many different issues. Whether I was in a good or a bad mood, I was able to receive support from other volunteers. I was relaxed when I came to the Hotline to meet other volunteers.

I remember that on one occasion when I met you (the author), I talked about my plans for a trip to Turkey. You gave me a great deal of information and advice. I did not expect so much in return for such a casual conversation. Of course, you might not recall your helpful action, nor could you understand how it left such a deep impression on me!

It is the exchange of information among volunteers who come from all walks of life, and listening to stories from different clients that allow me to keep track of the pace of society. During my spare time at the Hotline, I learn a great deal from volunteers who have different professional backgrounds and experience. For instance, I can understand the pressures on a teacher, a lawyer or social worker. I can hear different views on a social problem from various people. Besides, when I talk to clients, I feel the shift of the focus of some social problems. I can feel the change in the values of society, for instance on lover relationships, parenting style or even the attitude of people towards mental health patients.

It is the atmosphere of the service that has fostered my long stay in the service. The dealings with staff, volunteers or clients always provide me with useful information. I always think that being a member of society is good, to understand as much as possible from other people.

### **Curious about things in the society**

It is my similar belief that has encouraged me to work with the district board member office for the past twelve years. It is not because of my job that I pay attention to the things that happen in society. It is, in fact, it is my curiosity to learn about things in society that has led me to my current career and voluntary service in SBHK. Unlike other ladies, who I know like cooking or shopping, I care about the environment, public policy and utilities that affect the lives of citizens. It interests me to learn more about society, and I am eager to listen to my friends and clients.

The experience with clients might not be ideal in every case. If I feel that a client can benefit from our conversation, I have some satisfaction. However, if I feel that I am not able to help the client, I might feel disappointed and question myself. I also reflect on my handling and seek support from others. I always read through the case references more carefully to understand how clients can be handled better.

### **Being sympathetic to client**

I remember that once I handled a client with a very negative attitude to everything. The client claimed to have been victimized by the authorities and ended up being very negative towards people, things and himself. Such a negative attitude made the conversation very difficult. Though difficult, I persuaded the client that the volunteer whom the client had been speaking to was not as bad as he imagined. There were still good people around. Although the client did not rebut my statement, he did not respond. The process of communication with this kind of client is indeed difficult. I have mixed feelings about this sort of client. First, I feel sympathetic to their self-victimization, and, secondly, I still find it difficult to focus on the 'here and now' for them, which I think is essential to help them.

**People live under worry**

Due to my twenty years at SBHK, I deeply acknowledge how difficult it is to understand people from such superficial information such as their profession or appearance. I encountered a schoolboy with great academic talent who would not tell anything truthful to his fellow students, in order to maintain his superior position in the class. He would not pass on any tips to others as this would jeopardize his ranking, while ordinary students who wanted to perform better were prepared to share their information.

Professionals with a good reputation still have many worries. They worry about the funding to run their office, the salaries of their staff and the marketing of their business. In particular, lawyers worry about how to face their clients if they lose their litigation, or if they are found liable for negligence, even years after of providing service.

**Assisting in training course to refresh my knowledge**

I think that SBHK is a reputable organization. The general public is more respectful to volunteers of SBHK than to most other volunteers. However, I am not complacent about this. After listening to calls for so many years, I notice that I am not as patient as before. However, I always take the opportunity to supervise my Hotline volunteer trainees to remind myself that patience is required. By listening to the trainees' work and the discussions with them afterwards, I find new energy to refresh myself with regards to the attitude and skills required in the service. Still, I am cautious about my own performance in listening, as I have become older.

## Chapter 7 – Mr Lau, the great communicator

### **Love to face people**

*Mr Lau started his career as an electrical and mechanical (E&M) mechanic in the late 1970s, soon after he finished school. However, at the age of twenty-one, he noticed that he was interested in work that required him to deal with people. In 1982, he tried to apply for a job as a welfare worker in the social services sector. He was given a second interview. Unfortunately, he was eventually not accepted, probably due to a suspicion on the interviewer's part about how long he would stay with the job, as his present salary was much more than that of a welfare worker. In fact, Lau admitted that as his E&M job was stable and the salary was attractive, he did not have any further incentive to change jobs, despite the fact that he wanted work where he could have more contact with people. Mr Lau recalled....*

In fact, while I was working in the electrical and mechanical field, I joined the neighbourhood advice-action council as a volunteer to serve people. I think that I had good communication skills when I was the house captain at school. I had a very good relationship with other students. However, the neighbourhood advice-action council closed down later. I stopped my volunteer service for about a year.

One day, I read a recruitment advertisement by SBHK in a newspaper. I knew that it was not easy to become a Hotline volunteer in SBHK to serve people with suicidal tendencies. Nevertheless, I applied and I was admitted to the training course in 1984.

### **Soldiers were trained for thousand days, to be deployed for one moment**

So long as there are clients in society who need our service, I have the incentive to stay with the service. It is my desire to serve the clients, trying to pacify them when they feel depressed, sad or even suicidal. I think that the culture of Hong Kong does not favour the Hotline, and the majority of people in Hong Kong are not aware of the benefits of seeking help over a telephone hotline. People might go out to have a drink with friends and talk about their problems. However, their conversation might not be as constructive in solving their problems.

Perhaps it is due to the general education of people in Hong Kong. Unlike westerners, Hong Kong people do not like to seek professional advice from psychologists or psychiatrists. Most people are still questioning if counselling can solve their problems, yet there are still some clients in society who need our service. Over the years, I have dealt with many repeat callers, and many of them did not have a high risk of suicide. However, once I encountered a client with genuine emotional problems who had a desire for growth and change; that made me regain my energy to serve the Hotline. There is a Chinese saying, 'Soldiers were trained for thousand days, to be deployed just for one moment'. I adopted this attitude in my Hotline work and found my goal.

### **Stability and harmony foster volunteerism**

I admit that I have led a rather stable life. Not many incidents at work or at home troubled me.

A busy working life is the primary obstacle to voluntary service in Hong Kong. People who need to travel frequently in and out Hong Kong would find it difficult to maintain their service. Civil servants in general have a stable working environment, therefore SBHK does have a certain number of members from this sector. Nevertheless, still there are some civil servants who choose an even more stable life – by not joining any service at all!

Family harmony is another key factor that affects whether a volunteer will stay. If there are frequent family disputes, it is difficult for a volunteer to stay. I experienced some situations when the two generations of the in-laws were not living happily together. Despite the fact that these quarrels were unnecessary, there was not much that the family could do to stop them. Provided no one is physically hurt, everything could be settled, in time. However, such a distraction to life would not favour volunteer service such as at SBHK.

My living environment was so stable in the past so that I managed to study at night school from 7 to 9 pm, to date a girlfriend and go to work on the night shift. I used to travel from Kennedy Town (Hong Kong Island) to Jordan area (Kowloon) to meet my girlfriend (now my wife). With all my tight scheduling, I could still maintain my basic service in SBHK. Nevertheless, occasionally I needed to apply for a reduced service commitment to maintain my membership.

### **Independent childhood**

I am the youngest of four siblings. In fact, I am ten years younger than my preceding sister. I did not have peer siblings at home due to the age gap with my elder siblings. However, my childhood was as active as other children. I enjoyed playing on the hillside and rolling marbles with my friends. I was so independent that I could solve my problems by myself during my childhood.

I was not born with a golden key. I understood the need to be resilient when facing hardship in order to grow up independently. I notice that there are more people committing suicide now than in the past. In the past, people would find ways out when facing difficulties. I could tolerate eating very cheap meals. Earning money is not easy. It is a slow process to endure a hard life. I have tried manual labour, such as assembling plastic flowers and watches, before. I am one of the lucky generation that was born after World War II. I think that the life of my parents' generation was even worse. In 1970, it was not uncommon to see a whole family of eight people sleeping in just one bed. Still the suicide rate was lower than at present. I am dismayed at those people who harm themselves when facing adversity nowadays.

### **Ability to help oneself**

Many people do not believe that they have the ability to solve their problems. Instead of facing the problem, they choose to run away from the problem. This avoidance behaviour in the end renders them more serious emotional problems. Perhaps I am somehow trained to be very independent by my unique childhood experiences. Many people do not have the same experience and have become dependent on others when something goes wrong.

With the communication skills learned in SBHK, I have tried to encourage people to solve

problems by themselves. I think I am a person who people can trust and I have skills which can win the confidence of my clients as well as my fellow volunteers. Thus, I have gained confidence through continuing the service for near thirty years.

### **Learning through listening to radio programmes**

I tried not to stay at my starting level after receiving training from SBHK. After I joined the service, I became more and more interested in learning how to apply listening skills and linguistic approaches. I liked to listen to the midnight radio problem show when my favourite presenter answered live calls from listeners. These programmes lasted for two hours and I was keen to listen to them even at odd hours. I listened carefully and learned the empathetic approaches adopted by the DJ, and how, rather than helping them through solving their problems, the presenter directed the clients to make their own decision. I remember how, on one of the programmes, a psychiatrist known as Dr Yip was a guest speaker. Dr Yip was able to talk very comfortably with the phone-in client. He tactfully let the client understand his own issue. On another occasion, Dr Yip was asked to comment on the choice of jobs by a client. Dr Yip requested the client to consider his ability in his present job before considering a new job. Those conversations were insightful for me, and I learned from the radio programme how to tackle similar problems.

In recent years, I have enjoyed listening to another radio programme on Sunday. It is a programme where the presenter, Ms Tang, invites different celebrities to join her programme. The programme covers many different topics from time to time, such as the family, parenting or marriage, and I have picked up essential messages that have benefited me as a Hotline volunteer.

### **Providing resource information as a non-suicide contract**

Apart from the communication skills, I pay attention to the availability of social resources. Although I am not from the social services field, I am very conscious when I come across a new aspect of a social service when it arises. Many people in Hong Kong are not aware of the social resources available to them. Such lack of knowledge means that they are not able to deal with an adverse situation when it arises. Without peace of mind, people are likely to react too emotionally when anything goes wrong. The more bad emotions, the more confusion that they have. It ends up in a vicious cycle of bad emotions. I am very concerned about the triggering of such a cycle, and resources for citizens should be made available. I normally am not too concerned about clients after their telephone conversation. However, if I know that there are resources suitable for a particular client, I ask the client to contact me or leave a contact number for me to call back so that I could trace the required resources for them. I also consider this as another way of arranging a non-suicide contract with the client.

### **Added value for volunteers**

I notice that some volunteers only pay attention to things that happen around them. They do not bother to know about things that happen in other areas that are not of their immediate concern. However, I am a person who loves to learn new things. Many people do not know what services some new social work agencies provide. My wife is a nurse in a maternity and

child health clinic. I learned that there is a positive parenting programme (Triple P or 3P). It has an Australian origin and teaches parenting. Most parents do not know about this. Fortunately, they learn it from this programme. However, it is a waste of resources when most parents are not aware of the service. If more people knew about this, I think society would have fewer problems. That is why I like to be kept up to date about what the social services agencies are providing.

Perhaps I have a non-complacent attitude for the benefit of my client which drives me to acquire more counselling skills to carry on my voluntary service. About ten years ago, as a result of some in-house training courses, I learned about Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). I was very interested in the approach and I tried to apply some elements in my dialogue with clients. I was very conscious of my role in the Hotline as a listener, not as a counsellor or therapist. I was also aware of my superficial knowledge of CBT. Apart from the usual empathetic listening skills that I applied in the service, I adopted the simplest CBT approach to detect if there was any wrongful belief in the clients. If I could do so, I would try to challenge their core belief, hoping to change their habitual but unnecessary thoughts as far as possible. I had positive experiences through applying this skill and I will continue experimenting more with this approach.

### **Sharing of experience**

I know that my nickname among the volunteers is 'Big Brother'. I received this name back in the 1980s when SBHK was based in Lo Fu Ngam (Lok Fu, nowadays), where I took good care of my team members by preparing dinner boxes or snacks for them during their duty periods. Perhaps my teammates were touched by my attitude. At present, I continue to take care of my teammates, but not by preparing meals for them. Instead, I share my experiences, both in my personal life and in SBHK. I tried to pass on practical skills to the younger generation about how to handle certain clients. These skills include noting and controlling the speed of speech of the client; paying attention to emotional words; controlling my own curiosity by not asking unnecessary questions; listening carefully instead of applying any unnecessary psychological knowledge; and focusing on the unhappy incidents rather than the process of how clients became unhappy.

I am not an expert in delivering ideas systematically in class. By way of casual conversation, I can pass on my opinions and the insight that I have acquired over the years. I can talk for two hours to share my twenty years of experience. Being a very frank partner to other volunteers, I sometimes feel my influence over others.

### **Liberal but cautious approach in my family**

I do not share much of my volunteer working experience with my family. I have a son and a daughter. However, over the years, I do not know how they feel about my involvement in this suicide prevention hotline service. Perhaps it aligns with my independent and self-survival policy with regards to my parenting style, as I am not too talkative and authoritative to the children. I wonder if it could be the reciprocity effect of my teaching style that my children do not say anything about my service. Provided it does not deviate from the norm, as everyone in the family can do the things that they like. Nevertheless, I occasionally have reservations about

my style, as I question whether I have offered sufficient care to my children. It seems to be a liberal but cautious approach.

### **Verbal service**

I am interested in providing a verbal service in helping others. I am used to this kind of service from my experience on the Hotline. I would not attempt other, more regular service, such as visiting the elderly. So long as my career, family and living environment undergo no major change, I will no doubt remain in SBHK providing the Hotline service.

I am quite loyal to the core Hotline service, and that is why I did not take up any other medium-to long-term duties, such as becoming a group leader or Exco member, over the years. I wish to focus my effort on client-based duty. It is the counselling service in which I am interested. In the unlikely event that SBHK no longer provides the Hotline service, I still would like to serve as a volunteer with the life ambassador programme in our Life Education Center (LEC) or as a crisis assistant in our Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC).

### **Benefit at work**

Learning active listening skills in SBHK many years ago helped me in my full-time job. Indeed, I soon became a popular person and my colleagues could easily talk to me. Interestingly, I was particularly favoured by female colleagues! I attribute the reasons for this phenomenon to my apparently trustful and mature figure in the company. I apply the same rule of confidentiality in my working environment as in SBHK with my clients. This is extremely important for setting up a safe atmosphere between two persons in communication, especially for ladies. I am good at this kind of self-discipline, and have earned a reputation as a good listener in my office.

### **Keeping pace with society**

I also find that, by practising in the Hotline, I am benefited by keeping in touch with the pace of society. By responding to the problems posed by clients, I feel the change in the culture of Hong Kong. The progressive change of conversation topics from emotional problems to mental health problems; from career or academic problems of the individual to parenting problems; and from the problem of a husband having a mistress to finding one's other half on the Mainland: all indicate a change in the values of society.

### **Keep the brain running**

Another benefit for me to stay in the service is to keep my brain ticking over. The practice of active listening skills and the provision of empathetic responses to clients demand a quick processing of my mind. I suspect that such service would prevent me from developing dementia!

### **Maintain a safe distance from clients**

I maintain a good and safe distance with my client. I mean that, while I put myself in the same shoes as the client during the telephone conversation, I am not affected by the negative responses of the client. I am able to let go of everything, including the thoughts in relation to a telephone conversation, mostly straight after hanging up. I do not carry any sadness away or



bring any bad feelings home.

While I wish to help people, I mean that I wish to let the clients feel comfortable after our conversation. Of course, there have been occasions when such an ideal result could not be met, nevertheless I was not affected by such a situation. When I finish a call, I mean 'finish'. I have done my best. Nothing can affect or discourage me. I am fully aware of my non-professional status. I would not force a client to accept my way of thinking. If a client does not want to follow me, I adopt a different approach. This requires a mature attitude and a true understanding of the limitations of the Hotline service. The only situation that I might ponder over is the case where I need to follow up the client's case with some resource information. In this case, I might carry the residue of some thoughts after the conversation for a short period of time.

### **One thankful client is enough**

I remember that a female client discussed about her predicament in love one or two times with me more than ten years ago. After about ten years, she suddenly called and said that she wanted to see me face to face. In the interview she told me that she was able to handle those problems by herself. She knew how to handle her love problems and how to choose. She would never be unhappy about those sorts of things again. She came to tell me that she once did some unnecessary things, but now she would not do the same.

I was comfortable to hear from her. These were fruits of SBHK's effort. In retrospect, whatever reasons I stay in SBHK are not important. Even one successful case similar to the case above in a hundred other cases that I handled would keep me in the organization. I understand that it is impossible to complete every case perfectly like this. One such experience is already sufficient. There is no need for everyone to thank me.

### **Self-perpetual service**

With my desire to help people to understand their own capability in handling their problems, my drive for continuous learning through using listening and counselling skills, plus my positive reinforcement through my Hotline service and my personal life experience mean that I shall continue to help with the Hotline as a self-perpetuating service. Although all my best teammates whom I first met in SBHK have quit the service, I am not affected by this. I still maintain contact with them outside SBHK.

I am an independent worker. I understand that some long-serving volunteers might stay in SBHK due to the close and warm circle of friends that they have established over the years. This does not apply to me, as my closest friends are no longer serving in SBHK. I have made new friends with the new generation of volunteers. Basically, I am self-contained and I can sustain my energy to stay in the service by my continuous exploration and experience in providing the service. Unless there is drastic change in my career or family life, I would not consider leaving the service.

## Chapter 8 – Robert Wong, the entrepreneur

*Robert joined the SBHK Hotline in 1985, a few years after he graduated from Hong Kong University. Before he joined SBHK, he was serving as a volunteer in a Christian church called the 'New Movement' that emphasized community service. Robert used to go to the New Territories to help people to build their neighbourhood and community during his university years.*

*At the time of the interview, he was the chairman of SBHK. The following is his journey through the organization....*

### **A continuation of church service to the community**

Coincidentally, I saw the recruitment advertisement for SBHK and thought that suicide prevention was a great thing to do and that it was one of the things that I could do, under the umbrella of the church, to serve in the community. I expected that I could help people who were in adversity. This would have a greater impact on people than services such as visiting elderly people or orphans. Therefore, I tried to apply to be a volunteer.

I remember during the recruitment interview that I was asked what sort of cases I would be most afraid of. Without much consideration, I said 'mental illnesses. It was because I had encountered two to three depressed students when I was a secondary school teacher, right after I graduated from university. My impression was that it is difficult to handle depressed people.

### **Listening as a task**

There were about 300 applicants for the volunteers. I was admitted for a year's training, including lectures and a camp. During the training, I felt that listening might not be what I good at. However, it was still possible for me to acquire and demonstrate listening skills, and I learned. I managed to reach the requirements as if handling a specific task. I passed the entire requirements and became a Hotline volunteer.

### **Transfer the first case to supervisor**

I remember that I handled my first case only for five minutes. It was a lawyer who called in, saying that a client of his was standing at the edge of the roof of a building. The case did not involve mental illness. It was related to a lover relationship. Nevertheless, without much experience in handling such a crisis situation, I passed the phone to the volunteer supervisor. The supervisor took over the case and eventually went out to assist the lawyer. I did not accompany the supervisor and did not hear anything about the consequences of the case. During the period, it was not uncommon for volunteers to deal with suicide cases away from the centre.

### **Lack of emotion-related vocabulary**

Through the training provided by SBHK, I learned the basic skills and requirements of active listening. Despite the fact that the training material was simple, with handouts prepared in a

handwritten format, I was able to acquire the appropriate listening skills. However, during the training, I recognized that there was a lack of vocabulary of emotion-related words in my head. It was difficult for me to extract the right words to reflect the feelings of clients.

I reflect that I am not the kind of person who is good at sharing or even talking. I am not used to inviting friends out for a chat, or anything like that. Because I had studied computer science, I like to diagnose problems. This sort of diagnostic skill is, in fact, not required by the Hotline service.

### **Being incongruent**

During the initial stages of serving at the Hotline, I confessed that I was not congruent. This means that I could talk to the clients using all the listening skills that I had acquired, but that listening patiently to others is not my character. My inner self is different from my performing self. My listening is a form of role-play. By doing so, I could satisfy the requirements by helping people to become independent. It is, in a way, similar to my previous service in the New Territories in helping people to set up their neighbourhood. I bring a positive message to other people's lives. I try to let people see more possibilities and believe that everything is good in the world.

### **Life influencing life**

My father died when I was in primary school. Soon afterwards, I joined the Christian church. The 'New Movement' of the church is a form of existentialism. As a youth, I experienced the Movement in the service that I provided to others. It is suitable for me. It does not mean that I am carrying out a missionary job. In fact, I consider it more important to influence people in a positive direction than just to spread the Gospel. It is very similar to what SBHK currently advocates in one of its life education slogans: 'life influencing life'.

### **Left after one-and-a-half years**

After the year of qualifying training, I only served for six months. It was because I found it too tiring to travel two hours from Hong Kong University on Hong Kong Island to the Hotline Center in Shun Lee Estate in Kowloon. After serving for two hours I needed to travel another two hours back to the Island, on a Thursday. I did try to change my service to Sunday. However, such a move made it difficult for me to join church functions. In 1987, when my first daughter was born, I left SBHK.

### **Rejoined in 1993 with more enjoyment**

I rejoined SBHK in 1993. It was because my whole family had migrated to Canada. I was the so-called 'astronaut' who would travel frequently between Hong Kong and Canada alone. As I was living by myself in Hong Kong, I joined the Hotline service for two reasons in particular. The first was the good group bonding of the Thursday group. The group members were good and caring. The group was sufficient for me and I did not need to expand my circle of friends. The second reason was that I started to enjoy the individual interaction between clients and myself. I liked to see the communication, the influence and the change in clients after our conversation. Having said that, I did not deny my inadequacy in listening skills, and neither was I very hard

working for the service, as I needed to travel to and from Canada every few months.

### **More competent in taking a management role**

In 1996, I was somehow elected as group leader of the Thursday group. Perhaps I felt that I could not reject the nomination, due to my limited contribution in the group over the past years. In my second year as group leader, in 1998, I was elected as the representative of the group leader meeting at the Exco meeting.

In 1999 I joined Exco and became the chairman of SBHK. Although I took up the top management role of SBHK, I continued to listen to Hotline calls until 2005. Between 2000 and 2002, I and my Exco members were busy in developing two new centres, namely the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) and the Life Education Center (LEC) of SBHK. Instead of running just the volunteer-run Hotline service, SBHK started to employ more social workers to carry out crisis intervention and life education tasks. I considered the project to develop the two centres to be challenging. In fact, I thought that my role in contributing to suicide prevention work in Hong Kong in the form of management to be more suitable, and confessed that I was more skilled in the field of management than Hotline duty. It was one of my strengths to diagnose a problem and implement measures to handle the problem.

### **Used to handling problems**

In the past, I saw that the Exco always sought to have a common consensus from all its members before implementing new measures. In my view, this was quite inefficient and not satisfactory for the development of SBHK. Under my chairmanship, the decision-making system changed to a simple majority. Although most previous Exco members had stepped down upon the formation of my new committee, I was thankful to the past chairperson who remained in the new committee for some time to ensure the smooth transition of operations. Despite the fact that there were teething problems in the early operation of the new committee, I was comfortable with it as I am used to facing problems in my career. I had moved beyond my original desire to help people in need directly. It was also my call to demonstrate how to withstand the ups and downs in people's lives.

### **Unprecedented fortieth anniversary celebration gave a personal orientation**

The second challenge for me was the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of SBHK in 2000. With a mind to welcoming changes and being creative, SBHK decided to organize a carnival in the open square of the New Town Plaza next to Sha Tin Railway Station. The magnitude of the function was unprecedented, for SBHK. Over 300 volunteers were involved in running a full day's carnival for 1,500 people. There were game booths and guest performances. It could be clearly demonstrated that our volunteers could work together successfully. At that time, the Hotline only had a few staff, yet one of them, Miss Peggy Wong, put in a tremendous effort and enabled the function to run smoothly and successfully.

In retrospect, it was of the darkest period in my life. The company I worked for was undergoing a thorough overhaul. Basically, I lost my job, and I was involved in many overseas legal proceedings due to the explosion of the economic bubble worldwide. My life was at its lowest

point. Perhaps the involvement or my focus in running the fortieth anniversary helped me to put aside personal adversity and to get on with my life.

### **No parental care after high school**

Besides the loss of my father when I was in primary school, my mother passed away when I was in Form 5 (high school level). I was the youngest of six siblings. My next brother was five years older than me. As a result of my mother's death, I received no parental guidance thereafter. I understood my character better after I finished university. I did not care how much money I had. I had been mathematics teacher for three years, teaching Form 1 and Form 2 students, aged between twelve and thirteen, at a secondary school. Afterwards, I quit the job and went to write computer programs. I have had much unsuccessful experience in my business. Basically, I had monetary losses in a short period of time. There were ups and downs during that time. Honestly, I was quite lost and confused at that period. However, I was very resilient. I could survive even without remuneration from my business. Not long after, I was invited to join the partnership of my current business, where I continued to explore various business opportunities.

### **Nothing to bother about apart from one thing**

On the one hand, I understood myself as a rational person. It was not difficult for me to follow instructions or policies, or to carry out certain tasks. Also, I knew that I was not emotional. I was such a carefree person that I did not bother too much about what I had and what my future would be.

However, there was an exception. I was married at the age of twenty-three. The initiative to be married so early originated in my lack of confidence in maintaining my relationship with my then girlfriend, who was required to go for a six-month training course in the United Kingdom. Knowing that I was not good at keeping up relationships with others, we considered that it was too risky to be separated for six months. As a result, we were married before my wife went to the United Kingdom. It worked out well and we were able to maintain our relationship after the training trip and the period when the family migrated to Canada.

### **SBHK was the longest term**

I was not proud of my business achievement. Although I was earning, none of my businesses could survive for more than five years. My experience in SBHK has been quite different. I joined SBHK more than twenty years ago and I am still serving. The twenty years' experience in SBHK was more solid. However, I understood that I could not run everything. In fact, my partners in the business ran the company; my wife ran the house; and the Exco members and staff ran SBHK. I am proud to witness the continuity of the new 'babies', SCIC and LEC. Although 2012 marked the tenth anniversary of SCIC and LEC, I had never celebrated the tenth anniversary of any of my own businesses! Instead, the aftermath of a closed business might last for more than ten years. ☹

### **A successor is needed**

While SBHK had expanded over the past decade, I was worrying about my successor. SBHK was now a medium-sized NGO and it did not belong to me. Someone in SBHK needed to take over this chairmanship and run SBHK. Even if I were allowed to continue to serve, it would arouse criticism from members. I did not want to see this happen. The development of the two centres had really encouraged me to stay a long time with the organization. The initial workload was substantial. However, with everything on track, I had fewer concerns.

### **Thoughts of leaving SBHK**

Indeed, I thought of leaving SBHK in 2010 when I was not elected chairman of Exco. However, to my rational mind it was just because of my loss of the chairmanship. Besides, there were many outstanding policies and management issues to be dealt with after it was decided to overhaul the organizational structure of SBHK. I once thought of letting relevant senior members know of the current issues and then to resign. However, having experience in handling the ups and downs in my past, I managed to convince myself to wait to see what would happen next. To me, ups and downs are normal components of one's life.

### **Always be prepared to handle cases**

To me, suicide prevention has never ceased to be a challenge. It is a difficult problem with no known targets. Suicide prevention work is not addressed at any particular group. A person who is not a target today might become a target tomorrow. There are more and more people with mental illness. Even the effectiveness of any suicide prevention work done cannot be easily identified, I am always prepared to return to the telephone booth. Every few years I go back as a helper in recruit training and try to refresh my active listening skills. However, I believe that more life education work could be done in the society. That is why I am running another NGO on life education by myself.

### **Impressive cases**

Although I do not have much case experience, there are still cases which have left me with memories. There was once a lady banker who called several times to talk to me. The lady's husband, after a few years of struggle, finally died of cancer. At the time of the call, the lady was anxious about preparing for her promotion examination, and she was also panicking over the forthcoming Chinese New Year holiday when she needed to socialize with her late husband's family. After the Chinese New Year holiday, the lady called back saying that she had passed the examination, even without studying hard. She also socialized well with her in-laws briefly during the holiday. Both experiences went uneventfully, and she overcame her hesitation and continued to live normally.

Another case was when I received a call from a gentleman who was driving at the same time as talking on his mobile phone. I persuaded him to pull over and to call again. I waited for the next two hours without hearing from him. I was quite anxious while waiting during that period. However, clients make their own choices on the Hotline. It is their right to call only when they feel comfortable.

### **The character of volunteers determines the fate of SBHK**

One last thing that I wish to comment on was my experience with five different Exco members who took charge of Hotline membership policy and attendance. They were Thiess Chung, Wing Mui, Choi Wan, Siu Fong and Joyce. They all had different ideas about keeping up the attendance of Hotline volunteers. While the roles of volunteers are inevitably important in running SBHK, their differences in attitude and character are also influential to the organization at various periods of the Hotline's history. It was also interesting, but sad, to recall that there was a very keen volunteer who resigned when he disagreed with management policy that clients were not entitled to use the toilet at the centre. They could only use the public toilets.

In conclusion, I understood that, due to differences in the characters of volunteers, it is inevitable to have conflict from time to time. The world is the same. There is no perfect world and most things do not operate according to our plans and expectations. This is why ups and downs are the usual components of our lives. While the culture of the organization has been established for over sixty years, SBHK, like human beings, has its fate.

## Chapter 9 – Ms Cheung, mother of the group

### **Go camping without parental approval**

*Ms Cheung joined SBHK in 1982. She was most affected by an experience at secondary school. At the age of about fifteen, her class teacher organized a residential camp in Cheung Chau, which is one of the outlying islands of Hong Kong. Although it was not wild camping with tents, but a residential camp in a building, her father rejected her request to go without giving any reason. Her father even said to her: 'If you go, don't come home.' Ms Cheung began the interview by recalling what happened next....*

### **Anxiety relieved after talking to teacher**

I was very upset by the refusal. I thought that my father was very unreasonable. As it was the first camp that I was to attend and it was a sort of normal adolescent activity, I decided to go even without his permission. On the day of the camp I waited until my father left for work, I departed for the camp, just leaving a note at home.

However, when I was at the camp, I was still very worried about the reaction of my father when I went home afterwards. My anxiety was somehow spotted by one of the male teachers. The teacher sent the other students away from the beach and had a walk with me there. He tried to understand what was happening to me. I took the opportunity to tell the teacher how I managed to attend the camp and how unreasonable and authoritative my parents were. The teacher only made a minimal response to me and occasionally expressed his acknowledgement with some words of 'Hmm, Hmm'. Miraculously, my feelings changed. I had never felt that kind of comfortableness before. My problem and worry were half-solved. I felt so much understood. The talk with the teacher was very impressive, to me.

The story did not end here. After dismissal from the camp, one of the female teachers actually accompanied me home. She explained to my parents about the nature and activities of the camp. I recalled that my father did not say anything, nor did he scold me afterwards. The incident ended without any problems arising.

### **Touched by the listening skills**

I was very surprised and impressed by the effectiveness of the listening skill demonstrated by my teacher. I had had a personal experience of what it would be like to relieve a person's anxiety. I then decided to learn this listening skill, and I determined to become a social worker after graduation. My initial thought was to become a social worker to serve youth, as I had experienced how the generation gap with parents had badly influenced the development of my own youth: how judgmental communication had discouraged in-depth mutual understanding in the communication process. However, in retrospect, I was not disappointed by not being able to become a social worker. I was pleased with my subsequent career development.

Later, one of my friends who was a volunteer in SBHK told me that SBHK used active listening



skills to help clients. On another occasion, I saw the recruitment advertisement of SBHK and therefore applied as a volunteer.

Right up to now, after thirty years of serving in SBHK, I still feel that active listening is highly beneficial to clients. The practice of active listening is meaningful for both clients and volunteers.

### **Insights of serving in SBHK**

To respond to the question of what kept me in SBHK for so long, I think of a Chinese quotation: 'Helping people is the source of happiness'. In fact, I have had a good deal of insight into life through serving on the Hotline.

### **Avoid falling into a similar situation**

Although I have felt a little happiness after successfully talking to a client, this might not be the only source of energy that has maintained my service. I need to listen to many clients' experiences which I might never have personally experienced, before or after the call. However, in conversation with the clients, I understand how they put themselves into such a difficult position or how they came into the trouble. By learning the experience of the clients, I learn how to care and to understand a person under such difficult situation and, more importantly, I recognize how important it is to avoid positioning myself in such a situation. Fleeing from temptations such as extra-marital affairs is a typical example. Never entertain such delusive thoughts or dare to give it a try, otherwise pain and hurt will not be absent. I was constantly reminded of this on the Hotline service, which in turn was beneficial not only to my service to other clients, but also to my personal friends and relatives who were likely to fall into this trap.

### **Listen first**

Another benefit of learning active listening skills has been to practise them on my family. Without my family members noticing, I have applied the communication skills in my daily endeavours in the family. There was obvious improvement in the communication among my family members. When I talked to them, I was quiet at first. I focused on listening to what others were saying. I tried to understand what others were thinking and became attuned to them. I maintained an open mind, which allowed me to understand others more. Such listening behaviour meant that there would be no disagreement during the conversation and the others would not treat me as an enemy. When the others did not feel rejected, the communication became smoother. I listened to other people wholeheartedly and I did not respond or talk a great deal. I started to know how to understand and respect the thoughts of other people. The result of the communication was always fruitful, in this manner. It was quite different from before, when all the different opinions were presented together, when the family would end up in dispute and there could be no compromise.

I could still remember one question that my teacher put to me: 'Do you think your father cares too much about you? However, it seems that he does not know how to manage or constrain you.' This question was highly reflective to me, and it was also an objective truth about my situation.

After years of practice, I have internalized the active listening skills as part of my thinking. I have applied this in my voluntary service, my working environment and in all aspects of my life.

### **Friends with a common goal to serve**

I am thankful to SBHK, not only because I was given a platform to practise my listening skills. I am also thankful for coming to know many friends and fellow workers who joined SBHK to serve the community. We do not do it for money. Neither do we do it for fame or personal reputation. The commitment of the workers around me actually influenced me to be active in the service. I could not imagine anywhere where I could find such a group of friends whom I would meet every week and work together, having a common goal to serve clients. It is so valuable to have this group of people around me. As we are all volunteers, we have no conflict of interest and we do not compete with each other.

### **Strong belief that listening can help**

The Hotline service is meaningful to the client. I understand that when people feel depressed, being in a low mood and being too emotional or feeling hopeless, the active listening can help to calm them down. As I do not criticize the clients, they feel accepted. Together, we try to examine the difficulties and to explore further options for overcoming the difficulties. From time to time we find light at the end of the tunnel. Most clients thank me for bringing them new insights, or at least some clients thank me for my company, effort or the time spent with them. The situation resembles what I experienced at the beach when I was young. I echo the aim and service of SBHK wholeheartedly, and I have a working experience that reinforces my belief.

I recall that, on one occasion, I talked to a man who was actually committing suicide. He drank a great quantity of alcohol and cut his wrists, and was bleeding in Deep Water Bay, which was about 15 km from downtown. I could hear the sound of the waves. I tried to persuade him not to give up his life and suggested sending someone to help him. Eventually, a policeman arrived and took him to hospital. Before he hung up, the man asked if I would visit him at the hospital, and I promised to do so.

### **People find it difficult to face shame**

Later, I contacted the hospital and agreed with the nurse that he could be seen after normal visiting hours in order to provide more privacy for him. However, when I identified myself as the Samaritan Befriender and approached his bedside, the man denied knowing me and demanded that I should leave. He then turned his head away and did not look at me. I was surprised at his reaction. With a respectful smile, I left the hospital without much concern to what the man had said.

The end of the story was not as good as expected. However, this experience reinforced my belief about the importance of the Hotline service. It might be difficult for a person to face their shame openly. However, the nature of a telephone hotline service, which is not face to face, provides space for people to be rescued with dignity and a sense of control. They can accept the goodwill of a volunteer to reexamine their problems, or they can end the telephone call at any

time without any adverse consequences.

I have been in the service for over thirty years. I consider the service meaningful to clients and to volunteers. I do not deny that I have obtained some satisfaction from the service. The satisfaction has been felt after I have managed a case smoothly and clients were benefited by the conversation. However, this does not mean that I have not experienced any difficulty in maintaining my service.

### **Devotion to performing a task**

I recalled that there were periods when I really felt that it was hard to stay. It happened more than ten years ago when I left my full-time job. Although I became a housewife, I was determined to come closer to God and do more service for God. I studied the Bible and became a facilitator in a Bible study class. I devoted about two-thirds of my time to God and one-third of my time to my family, including SBHK.

I am a person who can only focus on one or two things at a time, as I need to devote much energy and effort to do my best at what I am working on. For the first twenty years in SBHK, the Hotline service was already part of my life. Although I was competent in listening skills, I still needed to make an effort to take care of my junior teammates. I knew that some of them described my efforts as mother-like, and I treat that as a compliment.

### **Change focus to serve God**

When I found that my call to serve God was more important than serving SBHK, I started to struggle with my time between serving God and SBHK. The service *for* God deserved the best of me. It really deserved a considerable amount of energy from me. I needed much quiet time to prepare myself, both physically and spiritually, before taking on the role of a group leader. The group leaders even needed to attend pre-class study. Due to the extra workload, I hardly had the physical strength, mental capacity and attention to serve the Hotline clients as before. Without such preparation, I knew that I could not perform as well as I should when communicating with clients.

### **Frustrated by nuisance callers**

Although I was used to handling suspected sexual harassment callers, I became quite annoyed when handling them during these periods when I was struggling. I thought that all my efforts to staff the Hotline, all my travelling time, rest time and staffing time were wasted by this sort of caller. I was frustrated by them and wanted to leave the service. My resilience was really tested for a period of more than two years.

### **Stay to protect marriage**

In retrospect, I recalled that there were two more considerations to assist me in fighting the hard times. The first consideration was my marriage. My husband was also a long-serving volunteer in SBHK. We have been serving in a team for a long time. Until now, the development of SBHK and, in particular, the Hotline service was still the primary concern of my husband, apart from his career and family. We had shared this common goal and topic of concern for a

long period. If I quit, it would leave my husband alone to deal with the issues and I might not be able to provide the same kind of support and sharing between us. I thought that it might even affect our marital relationship. In my determination to provide the ideal ingredients for the marriage, regardless of the arguably selfish nature of providing minimal service to SBHK, I tried my best to stay with him.

### **Stay for the team**

Another consideration for me was my worry about the 'falling stone' effect if I left SBHK. I recognized that fellow volunteers were mutually supporting each other in the Friday group, to which my husband and I belonged. If one of us left, there might be a breakdown in the bond, with more and more volunteers leaving. Perhaps this sort of mutual bonding was tacitly affecting each team member to maintain the full force of the team. With a fear of an adverse impact on SBHK, I provided minimal service, that is, only to listen to calls and provide case support.

There were both personal and global reasons to maintain my service on the Hotline. Nevertheless, I acknowledged the fact that much work had to be accomplished by teamwork. I was not concerned about dependency among the volunteers. However, I appreciated the importance of teamwork, especially in a suicide prevention hotline where volunteers had to handle many difficult situations and the negative emotions of callers. An atmosphere of mutual support was highly important.

### **Treat sex callers as genuine clients**

In particular, I recall the sex calls which frustrated me between 2003 and 2006. Despite my usual competency in handling calls, the mental energy and effort made to avoid being manipulated by the poor callers were exhausting. In SBHK, volunteers were trained to handle every call as a genuine case. Potential sex callers used to mask their agenda under an apparently emotional and sad life experience to catch the sympathy of volunteers. Sometimes volunteers could feel insulted by these callers.

### **Mixed feelings for manipulative callers**

Manipulative clients were another type of client with whom I had a special feeling. Very often I encountered clients who threatened to complain about volunteers or challenged their work. They could spend seventy per cent of the air-time scolding or complaining. I had mixed feelings for them. I might feel angry at the irrational accusations, but on the whole I felt sorry for them as people put so much energy on such unnecessary concerns.

It is quite exhausting to talk to someone who always thinks that they are correct in all senses. Our conversation would be like an intellectual competition. I needed to be careful not to provoke any further complaints or escalate any complaining attitude. I knew that any such complaints would cause unnecessary damage to SBHK or use extra staffing resources to settle the complaint or even queries from funders, even though the volunteer might not have done anything wrong. With this overall aim of minimizing trouble, I was able to control my emotions in handling such clients.

### **Internalize listening skills to exhibit empathy**

I could not apply the communication skills just with clients. I had internalized the concept of active listening in my life in order to exercise the skills properly. In other words, a person needed to be genuine in communication. However, I thought that the personality of a person would change in this direction if they internalized the value of active listening. The person could then exercise the skills necessary to deal with a client wholeheartedly. If a person only applied the skill of communication without being genuine, the effect would not be the same.

I knew nothing about active listening before, but I thought that personality could be formulated from experience. I learned active listening from SBHK and internalized it to become my life's philosophy. If more people acquired this life philosophy and applied this skill in communication, more people would accept and understand others, and fewer people would be hurt during communication. From my experience, I just believed that some theories were right. I followed them naturally in search for my ideal life. In the end, I internalized the philosophy.

### **Empathy with parents**

Over the years, I developed empathy towards the authoritative parenting that I had experienced. People's parenting methods are limited by their knowledge and educational level. Instead, I learned the importance of being sensitive to others' emotions and how to respect others' thoughts and opinions congruently before I can speak out purposively under such circumstances. I allowed myself more time to feel and think, before giving my response. I know how difficult, yet possible, it is to do it and therefore my reconciliation with my parents was achieved to create new meaning for my childhood experience.

I admit that I learned the active listening skill afresh. I applied the skills and subsequently internalized them as part of me. Such internalization allowed me to communicate with my clients purposefully. This congruency, sometimes called authenticity, is important in exhibiting empathy. I demonstrated how I could listen and accept the client wholeheartedly. It is not only a skill; it is also a philosophy of life. My positive experience with clients for the past thirty years of service is witness to the importance of congruency in exercising empathy.

### **Author's note:**

*James and Jongeward, in Born to Win, emphasize that only those who are authentic are winners of lives (James & Jongeward, 1978). For many years, SBHK recruited volunteers from all walks of life and provided training in active listening to them. SBHK insisted on selecting volunteers of the right calibre. The number of drop-outs or disqualified trainees during the whole year's training process always outnumbered the successful trainees. It is interesting to note that active listening can be internalized during the development of a volunteer. It might be possible to provide advanced training for volunteers, helping them to internalize the skill. This is an area worthy of further exploration.*

## Chapter 10 – Stephen, a reflective person

### **Family with strict rules**

*Stephen was brought up in a family of six siblings. His parents were strict in parenting. For instance, the children were scolded and beaten by their parents if they did not hold their chopsticks properly or if they talked during mealtimes. In addition to the strict house rules, his sisters were treated unequally, due to the tradition in Chinese society. Stephen saw the disharmony and inequality at home. Occasionally, his thoughts urged him to stand against his parents. He would take away the rattan rod to avoid his sisters being beaten by their parents. He would then hide from his parents for some time to avoid confrontation.*

*Living in such a dysfunctional home, Stephen explains in person in the following paragraphs how his character developed....*

### **Experience with helping professionals at the youth centre**

As a result of the disharmony at home, very often I went to the library at Caritas Youth Centre to study and the YMCA Youth Centre for leisure-time activities. I joined the youth service and some small activity groups. I used to go to their study room in preparation for the Hong Kong Certification of Education Examination (public high school examination). I received short-term training in communication and leadership, and I provided services to the elderly and even learned to provide guidance to some youths who were about two years younger than me. It was in the youth centres that I came across some priests and social workers. My experience of the centres was positive.

My good impression of professionals was further enhanced when I later joined the Youth Era Experience Program (時代青年體驗計劃) of Kwun Tong Methodist Social Service in 1987 for some small-group training and, in particular, a series of training courses covering psychology theories, reflective learning, peer support group and experimental learning, which used hiking as a platform to stimulate personal growth. Participants were given challenging scenarios during the activity when they came across knowledge, including psychology, which was useful for their growth. I joined the activities and later became a volunteer trainer on the project.

### **Growth training stimulated loving thoughts**

It was through this kind of training that I came to understand how to express myself, how to be confident and how to overcome difficulties. I recall that when I was young, I was so timid that I was afraid of calling out to get off a public bus and was afraid of dogs. I attributed my power to overcome all this difficulties to the training that I received from the social workers.

Though I was not happy with my family relationships, I was enlightened by one social worker who said to me: ‘if you find no one loves you, you may replace the resentment by loving others.’ I also recall that, when I was at the age of nine, I set myself a goal to be an assertive, honest and valuable person. I was also affected by my class teacher, who was a kind role model to teach me, rather than using the rattan rod (for corporal punishment).

With my personal experience of how to survive disharmony in the family and how to regain my personal confidence through guidance from social workers, I started to consider contributing more to society. In 1986, by chance, I saw the recruitment advertisement for SBHK and I applied to be a Hotline volunteer. I was admitted, although I thought that I was only marginally accepted, and I continued the long training journey.

### **Empathy can help clients**

I thought that a telephone hotline provided a very good platform for some clients. They did not need to worry about who was at the other end of the phone. By communicating with clients, volunteers could reflect their feelings and their situation. This helped the clients to widen or reorganize their minds on their problems. Empathy offered by the volunteer could also provide confidence to the clients, so that they knew that they were not alone and that there were people who really cared for them.

Through active listening, unconditional positive regard and empathic response of the volunteer, clients felt trust and rapport with them, and were given an opportunity and space to reorganize or transform them afterwards. However, the level of reorganization or transformation was dependent on how deeply one wanted to go internally, exposing one's feelings. I never forced the client to go deeper and deeper, and only provided space and empathy for clients to acknowledge their inner feelings when they felt ready. I would invite a client to do so. If the clients refused, they would stay at whatever level they were. By going deeper internally, I engaged in psychological contact with the clients. Such contact fostered a good therapist–client relationship, which is a major component in any successful counselling. Finally, the self-awareness and self-esteem of the client might be increased. In some circumstances, this might cause them to become more healthy and positive to react with their own problems and minimize their suicidal tendencies.

### **Spreading love and reflection**

From a wider perspective, I viewed the Hotline as a convenient means to deliver love and care to society. Though I was not a follower of any religion, I treasured the chance to spread the message of love in people's daily lives. The more love in society, the better.

I considered the Hotline service as a means for reflection. The reflection is not only for the clients but also for the volunteers. While clients reflected during and after the conversation, I also had my own reflections. I had my horizons widened in different aspects. In particular, I had a deeper understanding of marriage issues, homosexuality and suicidal people. My company with people suffering from these problematic issues was a way to allow clients to feel that someone was trying to understand their needs.

My experience of some chronic and repeated callers indicated that they have matured in understanding, after years of calling the Hotline. I could acknowledge the different stages of life that the clients have gone through. Their growth reinforced my desire to serve on the Hotline.

**Hesitation in the first three years of service**

The first time I thought of leaving SBHK was during my first year of service. I found I had a lack of competence in pursuing the skills of active listening. I was not able to allow the clients to express themselves very well. I found the suicide Hotline service challenging and was worried about whether I could pass the final screening. However, after I had more experience in handling clients with a higher suicide risk without any detrimental effect on them, my confidence came back and I considered myself competent for the service.

In the second and third years, I was discouraged to find that I had insufficient skills to handle mental health patients and clients with chronic depression. However, I started to explore how to enrich myself with more in-depth counselling skills. I undertook training courses outside SBHK and tried to improve my ability to help those clients, and I was also involved in helping with the Hotline training arrangements. I later became one of the Exco members, focusing on volunteer training.

**Organizing training from university**

I organized additional in-house training on counselling skills from clinical psychologists. I also arranged with the Family Planning Association courses on sex to help volunteers to understand this apparently mysterious topic. My effort at soliciting support from universities was most painful, as most universities were not willing to provide concessionary training to Hotline volunteers, as they thought they were not professional enough to receive such training. However, I never gave up and was finally successful in persuading a university to provide the course. I considered this a major success for myself and the Hotline, proving to tertiary institutions the commitment of SBHK to society.

**Commitment to serve Hong Kong**

To me, such commitment to society was again verified in 2003 when Hong Kong was affected by the deadly disease of SARS. While citizens were panicking, SBHK continued its operations without ceasing. I could make an analogy of people sailing in the same boat; it was the loyalty, trust and team spirit that contributed to its success.

**Internal conflict on difference in views**

There were occasions when Hotline members were not so united. During one of these periods I was a member of the Exco. There was internal political fighting among groups of members who had different philosophies. Although technically no one was wrong, the insistence of opinions or some policies which could not be compromised among different parties disturbed the harmony of the organization. In retrospect, I treasured the chance listen to several different points of view when considering issues. There was a need to balance administrative requirements with internal care for staff and volunteers.

Nevertheless, my experience in Exco and the negotiation process also provided me with an understanding of the extrovert part of my character, aside from my long-standing self-evaluation of being an introvert.



### **Grouping changes annoyed me**

I resented the change of the grouping method, from the original seven vertical groups named from Monday to Sunday, to a horizontal grouping method of morning, afternoon, evening and overnight, based on the serving time periods. I had enjoyed companionship in the Saturday group, and I and my closest volunteers had to split into different groups. However, when I felt the acceptance of the 'big brothers and sisters' in the new group, I felt encouraged to stay with them. The 'big brothers and sisters' reminded me of the nature of this valuable voluntary service and who were the clients to be served. Therefore, I remained in the service.

### **Studying counselling enhanced self-awareness**

In late 1997, I and several other volunteers joined the first Master of Arts in Work Based Learning (Counselling Studies) course, which was jointly organized by SBHK and Middlesex University in the United Kingdom. The course reminded me of finding an approach that was most suitable for individual counsellors. With this in mind, after my graduation from the Master's course, I decided to deepen my counselling skills with integration of client-centre therapy, the SATIR model, behavioural and narrative approaches.

### **Reflection in daily life**

I mentioned before that I reflected not only after conversations with clients. In fact, with different types of counselling knowledge in mind, I did much reflection in my daily life. On one occasion when I picked up a lost mobile phone at the airport, I reflected on my immediate reaction to take advantage by keeping the phone, I started to consider the feelings of the owner of the phone and how inconvenient they could be and how they would feel unhappy by the loss. I also reflected on how joyful the owner would be if the phone could be retrieved. I therefore took the phone to the lost and found counter at the airport. Later, a Singaporean called me and thanked me for returning his phone. This was a win-win solution. Winning for the owner, and even for Hong Kong, as the owner would have a good impression of Hong Kong. I thought that my action was affected by the behavioural approach that I had learned.

### **Need to resolve childhood trauma and unfinished business**

On another occasion, when my daughter said to me that I was a good man except when I was angry, and my son once encouraged me and said that 'solutions are always more than problems', I reflected that I had already influenced my children to think more about their emotions. I believed that it was a good practice for them. They would increase their self-awareness and subsequently both of them could gradually get over any bad influence of any traumatic childhood experience.

I also associate this with the vicious cycle of problematic childhoods that subconsciously drove people to have early and immature marriages. However, those people were usually not mature enough to be parents. They somehow extended their childhood traumas to the next generation by repeating what their parents had done to them. Therefore, I really urge people to think carefully before choosing a spouse and getting married.

I remember an occasion when a woman called and talked about the death of her son a few years ago. It was through this conversation that the woman found that she had yet to overcome her emotions because of her grief. The case brought to my attention the long-lasting adverse effect of any unresolved and untreated emotion.

### **Life is unpredictable**

I recall one case when a male medical doctor called the Hotline expressing his sadness over the sudden death of his wife. The doctor cried sadly and blamed himself for not being able to save his wife. In facing such a scenario, I admitted that what I could do was to exercise my empathy and offer my understanding to the client. I gradually convinced him that it was nothing related to his profession. Everyone would feel the same kind of shame and helplessness when a beloved one passed away. I reflected that life is always so unpredictable and we have to live with this.

### **Moral framework other than homosexuality**

From time to time, when I listened to homosexual callers, I understood my own moral framework. I accepted lesbians more than gay people. However, I understood the need for love in them, which was similar to that of any heterosexual lover. However, I expanded my thoughts on the moral framework to something more than the homosexuality. I noticed that there were many other moral frameworks in society that we need to be aware of.

### **Peace comes from helping others**

Despite the fact that my career path was not as satisfactory as I envisaged, I discovered that my core source of internal peacefulness comes from helping other people to overcome difficulties and growth. My son had reading difficulties that attracted a great deal of special attention from me and my wife. However, I considered this a challenge for us to overcome. As mentioned before, I was so much touched by my son when he, after going through so much difficult time in studying, told me that 'solutions are always more than problems'. With some positive experience in receiving guidance from social workers in early childhood, it was amazing to see how I steered my journey of self-discovery through my commitment to the Hotline service.

## Chapter 11 – Vincent, the challenge seeker

### **No part-time job**

After I matriculated from school, I started working at the airport in 1981. I worked on a shift roster. My original intention was to undertake some academic studies so that I could obtain a university degree. However, my shift patterns were very irregular and involved overnight work. I could not take any formal or long-term courses at university. Then I had another idea: to find a part-time job. However, there was still no progress in finding a suitable part-time job after a few years. In the end, I only took some short courses on interesting subjects.

I remember that, while I was attending a course on education at the Extra Mural Department of the University of Hong Kong, I saw a poster on the noticeboard where SBHK advertised for Hotline volunteers. I took notes of the details and later I applied. In fact, SBHK was not strange to me. When I was about 12 years old, I had once been to the Lok Fu centre of SBHK with my mother.

### **Known about SBHK since childhood**

In the 1970s, many families applied for government housing because of the low rent. There were seven in my family, including my parents. It was the case that the size of the public housing was smaller for a seven-member family than an eight-member family. While we had been queuing for the seven-member flat for many years, a close relative from Mainland China migrated to Hong Kong. My parents added her name and submitted a revised application for a bigger flat. Unfortunately, the relative later decided not to stay with us. When we wanted to revert our housing application to the seven-member flat, the Housing Department said that we needed to start queuing again. This meant that our earlier years of waiting time had been wasted. My parents did not accept this arrangement and went to see a member of the Legislative Council, Mrs Elsie Tu, CBE, who would support citizens to fight for justice against the government red tape. Elsie's office in fact was the centre of SBHK in Lo Fu Ngam.

I did not know why, but my mother chose to take me with her to see Elsie. My mother explained our situation to her in tears. Elsie promised that she would write a letter of complaint to the Housing Department for us. Eventually, we regained our original priority and moved into our 345 sq. ft. public housing flat in Oi Man Estate in 1975, after being on the waiting list for ten years. The office in SBHK was small, with a few office desks. Most of Elsie's assistants were men in shirts, if I remember correctly. I was not sure if this experience really influenced my decision to join SBHK or not. Nevertheless, as I could not find any part-time job, I started to volunteer.

The volunteer who met me at the recruitment interview was still a serving member. I did not know why he accepted me for the volunteer training course, but anyway I thanked him for giving me the chance. I was really thankful to be able to join this organization.

### **Joined the Monday group**

After the ten three-hour evening training sessions that took place over three consecutive

months, I graduated from the class and started to join the Monday group in June 1983. In those days, most of the group members reported for duty in the evening. The atmosphere in the evening at the centre was warm, like a family. I reported for duty in the evening during my initial attachment to the group. However, later on when I had more confidence in my work at the centre, I worked mostly in the morning or the afternoon as there was more demand for volunteers in the day than in the evening.

### **Independent worker**

It was quite a lonely feeling to report for duty in the day, as there were not many volunteers. Even when there were some, I was not very sociable in becoming acquainted with them. During that time, I recognized that I was a very independent person. I really did not need other people to accompany me. My overall strategy was to report at my available time and make my maximum contribution to the clients.

### **Knowledgeable Uncle Chao**

The early duty in Lok Fu was quite tough. Volunteers needed to use a dirty public toilet. The size of the centre was small. There were only two telephone booths and a small working table. There was a corner for administration staff and a small partitioned room for an old man, Uncle Chao, who lived in the centre as our security guard. Because of his northern-China accent, sometimes I could not understand what he said. However, he had rich life experience, especially from during the civil war in China, and he was willing to give us his opinions.

Since volunteers were the major workforce of SBHK, there was only one staff member helping us with the daily administration. All other matters were handled by volunteers, especially the Exco. I was quite new when serving at the Lok Fu Center, and I did not know much about the Exco or its members at that period.

### **No OND for female workers**

By that time, SBHK had moved to a new centre in Shun Lee Estate, as it was a new housing estate. The working environment was far better than in Lok Fu. It was especially the case for the OND. The public toilet in Lok Fu which we had to use was outside the back door of the centre. The environment was dark and very often I could see drug addicts around. It was a really insecure environment. SBHK, rightly, did not allow female volunteers to take the OND shift in Lok Fu.

### **New centre led to high turnover rate**

The Shun Lee centre had a Hotline working room and a conference room. It was more spacious than the Lok Fu centre. Although the environment at Shun Lee was better than before, it was not a convenient location for the volunteers. It was not located on the Mass Transit Railway (MTR). The majority of volunteers needed to take an extra bus or minibus trip from the nearby MTR station. As a result, the travelling time to and from the centre was longer. The centre made no positive contribution in terms of maintaining a stable volunteer workforce. The turnover rate for volunteers was high. However, the location had no adverse impact on me, as I used to drive there from Kai Tak Airport after work.

### **Monthly OND for eighteen years**

Besides, since I was unmarried, I carried out OND once a month. I was married in 1990, but I did not stop the OND until around year 2001. Since my wife was also a member of SBHK until she gave birth to our first child, she knew what I was doing and did not complain about my monthly absence. I was thankful for her trust and understanding. I actually carried out my monthly OND for eighteen years!

### **Forming of a special group, 'The Samaritans Beyond'**

In July 1999, when I joined the Exco as secretary, I noticed that the trend of securing unmarried male members to man the overnight shift was not promising. Instead of asking the Exco to change the policy to deploy more staffing for OND, I took the initiative to form a group of special volunteers who could take more ONDs. As it was approaching year 2000, I named the group 'The Samaritans Beyond'. I remembered that there were about a hundred members on the volunteer contact list. I called them up one by one and told them about the philosophy of the 'Samaritan Beyond' and asked for their support to report for OND once per month, regardless of their marital status and gender. About fifteen of them responded to my appeal and started their extra service. The service lasted for a year, until members felt very tired and discontinued the additional OND service. The 'Samaritans Beyond' was then gradually dissolved.

### **Confusion on where I was during OND**

I would not disagree that doing OND is exhausting. Even though I appealed for more people to undertake OND, I sometimes also felt exhausted. It was particularly the case as I already had an overnight shift every four days in my job at the airport. Besides, occasionally I also needed to attend overnight shift for another volunteer service at the Royal Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force. Sometimes I sat in the telephone booth and fell asleep if there were no incoming calls. When the phone suddenly rang, I worried that I might not be able to wake up quickly enough. I really needed a few seconds to become fully aware again before I could hold the conversation.

### **Limitation of material support**

Interestingly, many volunteers, like me, can remember the first case that they handled. I remembered my first case was a young lady of about eighteen who was short of HK\$300 to assist her brother. \$300 was an awkward amount, as it was not easy for poor people to acquire, but relatively affordable for people with an average income in 1983. I thought about, what if I lent or gave her the amount to meet her needs? Of course, I did not give any money to her in the end. It was the process of working with her feelings, without directly giving her money, that struck me. No matter how much empathy I offered, I could not meet her material needs. The client cried painfully that the money could not be made available. What I could offer was limited. It was especially true, as this was the first call that I received. I had yet to gain the experience to adapt to this kind of limitation.

### **Terrified by the sound of wind on MTR platform**

Another client that I remember more vividly was a young lady who called me up nearly every

time that I reported for duty in my early service period. As volunteers were allowed to inform clients of their surname, volunteer number and shift pattern, the client chose to talk to me nearly every week when I came on duty. Unfortunately, I could not see much progress in her during the period. She did not seem to focus on finding a solution to her problem. When I started to change to another role in the service, I explained that I would no longer be in a position to work with her problem. She was sad and sometimes she still insisted on talking to me. On one occasion, she was crying while phoning me from an MTR train platform. When a train was approaching the station, I could hear the sound of the wind generated by the movement of the train. This, together with her crying, made me terrified and worried as to whether she would jump on the track and commit suicide. Fortunately, things were not so bad every time. On another evening, she delivered a cake to our centre while I was absent. It ended up that other volunteers ate the cake happily and told me about it the following week. Nevertheless, I was glad to know that the client gradually detached herself from me.

### **Group leader after ten years**

As I worked shifts, I was not able to commit as a group leader in my first ten years in SBHK due to fluctuating working hours. It was after a decade, in 1993, when I was promoted in my career and started to work regular office hours, when I could not report for daytime Hotline duty any more. Thereafter, I tried a few years as a group leader. I was not interested in being a group leader, as I was not the kind of person who could provide continuous care to members. I could manage task deployments such as organizing group gatherings or arranging mentors for new trainees, but I could not exercise care for each member. As far as I could remember, most of the good group leaders were female volunteers. No way could I be like them!

### **Difficult decision to fail a trainee**

It was only when I became a group leader at the Shun Lee Center that I started to learn more about the Exco, as group leaders had regular group leader meetings with the Exco members attending. As group leader, I needed to organize group activities and, more importantly, arrange in-service training for new recruits. Sometimes we needed to pair up a recruit with a more experienced volunteer in Shun Lee Center, so that the experienced volunteer could make a pseudo-telephone call through our internal telephone line so the new recruit could practise. They then discussed the experience and feelings about the conversation in the presence of the group leader or other experienced worker. It was like an apprentice system. For me, the most difficult part was to fail somebody at the overall assessment after working together for so many weeks. It was really a tough decision. However, such a decision was normally based on the unsatisfactory performance of the recruits or the worry that the recruits could not bear their own fluctuating emotions when handling high-risk cases. I needed to tell myself that the decision was made for the benefit of the clients, SBHK and the recruits.

### **Service first**

In the old days, SBHK divided members into just seven groups, Monday to Sunday. The bonds of group members were remarkable. Normally, I did not need to bring any snacks to the centre as there were some motherly members who would do so. Members worked together as a team and would divide work on the spot, as necessary. Everyone was clear in their minds that service

came first. Whatever laughter we were enjoying, once the telephone rang one of us would pick it up. This habit still continues, without any change.

Although the grouping method changed, with more groups, and the bonds of each group are not as good as before, this did not affect my passion to stay with SBHK. As I was quite an independent person, I could pass the day just with clients; listening to what they wished to tell was always the reason why I stayed.

### **Serving suicide prevention from a wider prospective**

Although I joined the Exco in 1999, I maintained my duty at the Hotline as well as the other management duties. It was after nearly four years that I found it too harsh to maintain my regular Hotline service together with the Exco duties. However, the life or the activities of an Exco member did not diminish my passion to serve in SBHK. In fact, as an Exco member, I looked at suicide prevention from a wider perspective.

From a short-term frontline telephone service, my focus expanded to cover the medium-term crisis intervention face-to-face service; from a para-counselling service, our coverage extended to life education at school and in the community; from volunteer training we shifted to provide professional counselling training; and from community service, we looked at the global tendency and large, territory-wide campaigns. There were more opportunities and challenges for me, as an amateur, to discuss suicide prevention issues with government officials, professionals, academics and the mass media.

### **Spokesperson for SBHK**

In January 1997, I changed job from a private company to a government department, and my first posting was as the spokesman for the department. I had to handle reporters daily. The two-year experience in that post gave me confidence to be the spokesperson for SBHK, as well. So I changed my role in the Exco and selected handling the media and public relations issues. I was forced to learn much information in a short time. I responded to reporters' enquiries when tragic suicide incidents occurred and made an appeal to the public for suicide prevention, as far as possible.

### **Urgent public appeal**

I remember an occasion in the 2000s when two suicide pacts occurred within a week. It seemed to be some kind of copycat effect when a pair of lovers committed suicide just a few days after a married couple committed suicide. I told myself and the centre-in-charge that, if a third case occurred shortly, we needed to set up a press conference to make an urgent public appeal to try to stop the trend. Unfortunately, a third case did happen, just the following week. Immediately, I arranged a press conference in the afternoon and talked about the situation. In fact, we thought that SBHK had an obligation to make an appeal during such situations. However, the mass media reacted quite differently. Instead of reporting our appeal for no further suicide pacts, they gave out information on other issues. There was disappointment when reading the newspaper the following day. However, it was still fortunate that no more suicide pacts occurred thereafter.

### **Debate on euthanasia**

Perhaps my character encourages me to face challenges. I was quite willing to take up the role when such challenges arose. I recalled that on one occasion, when Dr Philips Nitschke from Australia, the so-called 'Doctor Death', came to Hong Kong appealing for support for euthanasia, I met him on three consecutive days, debating with him at a press conference, a live TV programme and at a church forum on the issue. Although I was willing to gather information to support our position that life is precious and euthanasia should not be considered, it was still a very big challenge for me.

### **Too reluctant to leave!**

I had never thought of leaving SBHK, but there were occasions when I did feel that my service was not up to speed. The first occasion was in the early 1990s when I became used to the Hotline service structure and had more confidence. It was a little boring to have the same experience every week. Perhaps I was reluctant to make any change at all! I kept on undertaking the service. However, due to some changes in the work environment, I started to study for my law degree at the extra mural centre of Hong Kong University. This kept me busy and I had no time to think about leaving.

### **More energy when facing new challenges**

Another dark period was late 2000s, when the 'Samaritans Beyond' project was winding down. It was quite a disappointing moment for me to learn that volunteers were getting too tired for a monthly OND duty, while I had not once stopped doing my monthly OND since 1983. Although I was one of the Exco members, I did not feel that I contributed much to the Exco. Things changed a bit when we started to organize the new the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) and Life Education Center (LEC), as well as when I took up the public relations matters for the Exco. I felt charged with more energy to work with my counterparts.

### **Masters course in counselling changed my life**

In 2007, SBHK was successful in collaborating with the Hong Kong Center of Middlesex University in the United Kingdom to run a Master of Arts in Work Based Learning (Counselling) course. Together with eight other volunteers and some non-SBHK students, we embarked on the two-year journey of the inaugural course. It was a fruitful experience for me to attend the course, as I found out that I really enjoyed studying counselling and psychology. I also changed from a non-book reader to a book chaser. When I read some materials that I found interesting and wanted to explore more, I looked for the source of the information through the references and bibliography, and tried to read the original texts to understand their exact meaning. In retrospect, it was this change of attitude and interest in reading books that changed my life.

### **Sluggishness in writing**

When I started to have interviews with my fellow volunteers in December 2011 to conduct research and write this book, I also started to ask my friends, my children and their friends to transcribe the recorded conversations into Chinese. I could not do this by myself, as my Chinese typing was so poor and slow. As the meetings with volunteers continued, more and more



transcripts were produced. However, I decided to translate all these Chinese transcripts into English by myself so that I could recall the details and be aware of any discrepancies between the recorded content and the notes that I took during the meetings. This process actually took two years to complete.

After this long process, I was so tired that I began to experience what I could only describe as boredom. I thought about this 'boredom' for some time, and I came to realize it as a type of sickness. I had an inability to draw any major conclusion on how the wisdom which seemed so much a part of them, such as their humility, had been arrived at. For a period of more than a year I held everything in abeyance. It was just like the lyrics of one of the Mindfulness mantras: 'happiness is here and now'; 'nowhere to go, nothing to do', but of course not in any moment of happiness!

However, in April 2014, I met my advisor, Dr Kate Maguire of Middlesex University, in Hong Kong. Thanks to her encouragement, I was able to continue to writing this book.

### **Intense suffering**

Fortunately or unfortunately, in retrospect something happened in late 2013: I lost my identity. I say 'lost' in a sense that I am very confused about myself, whether what I had done before was right or wrong. In a particular social setting, I was led to believe that I was a vulgar person and untrustworthy. The situation was just like we have perhaps seen in a film when a son, who regarded his father as his life's sample of good man, all of a sudden saw his father being arrested by the police for a particular crime. The son's whole value system of a good man collapsed.

I was sensitive to the word 'trust', even in my adolescence. When I was a child, I always told myself that if I trusted someone yet was finally abused or hurt, it was not my fault. I did not need to worry too much. Another enlightening statement that I learned was from the late Italian catholic priest, Fr. Bruno Gelosa, in St Louis School. He once smiled at me and asked: 'Ah Kei (Vincent), do you see the sun? Do you believe that there is a sun?'

If you actually see, touch or smell something, you do not need to believe or trust that something exists. Trust or belief is only applied to something intangible, like God or the trustworthiness of someone. If you trust someone, you accept whatever he or she does without your confidence in them being shaken. When doubts arise, you may have moments of uncertainty. However, if you are trustful enough, you will go back to your equilibrium, maintain a neutral position and continue to trust.

Therefore, when a friend chose not to trust me, the pendulum swung to one side and did not return. It was a very serious issue and was a serious blow to me. I had always considered myself both trustworthy and trusting, and I could not bear the fact that someone could think that I was not trustworthy or that I had betrayed anyone.

In fact, there was not only a sadness of loss. There was also a guilty feeling: the self-blame of

what I had done to contribute to such a sad and irretrievable consequence. Strong feelings of remorse attacked me at unexpected times, throwing me off balance. I kept asking myself how this could have happened when I was supposed to be experienced in handling emotional conflicts in myself and others. All that held me together – my thoughts, my self-confidence, my life philosophy, my way of being with people and my whole value system – were profoundly shaken. I could not fruitfully communicate with the party concerned and there was nothing I could do to rectify the situation. It was painful. Although it was well known in my inner circle of friends and my family, and it was even once reported in a newspaper featuring me that I was a very sentimental person who cried easily, the situation during that period was so distressing that I cried without tears. Only once did I shed tears. I knew that this behaviour was a symptom of depression.

During those months, which I describe as the lowest point of my life, I kept thinking about the words of Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, and asked myself one question: 'Is there a reason for my suffering?'

The answer did not come for three months. One morning, when I was travelling on a bus, a thought entered my mind uninvited, but was nevertheless welcome. 'Everyone should be respected for their free will'. That is to say, if a person, for whatever reason, feels the need to think or do something in a unique way and if these thoughts or actions bring comfort, ease or calmness to the person, as a friend of this person, I need to respect, it even if such thoughts or actions are not in my favour.

The germination of this thought did not end here. My mind continued to elaborate on this idea and I understood that my sadness actually came from my desire to maintain that attachment, despite the unwillingness of the other party. It had a selfish origin in me. Then I tried to think in a way to be rid of my selfish thoughts. At that moment, miraculously, something happened. I had a feeling of shifting my thought from my brain to my heart, and what was richly filling my heart was an outburst of a sense of selflessness. It was like an explosion in my heart, but with indescribable joy. It was a joyful feeling that I had never experienced before. I did not hold this joyful feeling for any length of time. In fact, it was just a split second or a maximum two seconds, I am not sure. However, the impact of this was powerful and long lasting for me.

Together with the joy was another more important feeling, which lasted longer. It was the feeling of being aligned with the good deeds or virtues of the universe. This was to say that suddenly I seemed to be able to understand plenty of things more in depth, such as trust, love, empathy, creativity, generosity and compassion. I felt that my whole person had changed, and that it was a change towards something holistic. It was holistic for me, and holistic for the world and the universe.

### **Like tuning a radio**

To give an analogy of what I mean by feeling aligned with the universe, I actually thought of the following soon after the experience. It was an aviation metaphor, naturally, because that is my profession.

The brain, heart, selflessness, love, trust and compassion can all be represented by a radio frequency. The precise frequency says for the brain is 123.40000 Hertz (Hz), 456.80000 Hz for the heart, 432.30000 Hz for selflessness and 984.40000 Hz for love. People in the world are always using their brain and heart or practising traditional virtues such as love, compassion, trust, and selflessness in a radio of their own, aiming at tuning to that precise frequency. However, under normal circumstance, due to a whole range of factors, they sometimes approach but never quite achieve precise tuning. For example, they might tune to 123.40045 for brain, 456.80011 Hz for heart and 432.30305 Hz for selflessness.

My experience on the bus was the moment when I suddenly, successfully, only for a moment hit the right frequency and I felt at once alignment with the world. Although the moment was short, it presented the greatest moment of human joy, happiness with glimpse of wisdom. Meditative religions speak about such moments using a different language, like the Buddhists speak of Nirvana; Hinduism of enlightenment and the highest Chakra; and Christianity of being suffused by the Holy Spirit. The human being and the universe are united in one.

I remembered that I had a feeling like my heart was blossoming with beautiful flowers a few days after, when I awoke at 5 am. The ancient Egyptians and Eastern religions had the metaphor of the lotus flower, the beauty that emerged from the mud, the symbol of primordial beginnings in base matter. Although the feeling did not last long, the pattern of thoughts remained thereafter. Suddenly, I seemed to have many thoughts in my mind that I was confident about, but I was still puzzling on the nature of that, what I could only call a miraculous moment.

Needless to say, I was thankful to my experience of being 'lost', which seemed to have indirectly contributed to my 'awakening'. Gurdjieff (Speeth, 1989) and Ouspensky (1949), two twentieth-century seekers of the truth of the human condition, called this the awakening into consciousness, and said that humans spent more time in a kind of trance than they did awake. We only know we are in a trance because of those moments that we only very occasionally experience of an overwhelming sense of love, a different kind of vision, a feeling of total congruence, and resonance with all life and the universe. It had taken pain to awaken me.

### **Self-transcendence**

Interestingly, about that experience, one word came to my mind: transcendence. I learned about this word during the course on positive psychology and I only apprehended its meaning as something to do with 'helping others to self-actualize', and I do not fully agree with this now. But I was not really interested in it and, perhaps not fully awake, and did not pursue its meaning further. However, afterwards I started to read books and research this term.

Such research began to give me a better understanding of many things that I had read in psychology, but had read cognitively. I went back to Maslow and I began to underline the words and phrases that resonated with me yet which I had not really understood before as having anything significant to offer me. Before, they were just descriptions disconnected from my life (Maslow, 1968: 169):

“It is true that human beings strive perpetually towards ultimate humanness, which itself may be anyway a different kind of Becoming and growing. It’s as if we were doomed forever to try to arrive at a state to which we could never attain. Fortunately, we now know this not to be true, or at least it is not the only truth. There is another truth that integrates with it. We are again and again rewarded for good. Becoming by transient states of absolute Being, by peak-experiences. Achieving basic-need gratifications gives as many peak-experiences, each of which are absolute delights perfect in themselves, and needing no more than themselves to validate life. This is like rejecting the notion that a Heaven lies someplace beyond the end of the path of life. Heaven, so to speak, lies waiting for us through life, ready to step into for a time and to enjoy before we come back to our ordinary life of striving. And once we have been in it, we can remember it forever, and feed ourselves on this memory and be sustained in time of stress.

Not only this, but the process of moment-to-moment growth is itself intrinsically rewarding and delightful in an absolute sense. If they are not mountain peak-experiences at least they are foothill-experiences, little glimpses of absolute, self-validative delight, little moments of Being. Being and Becoming are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. Approach and arriving are both in themselves rewarding.

I want to differentiate the Heaven ahead (growth and transcendence) from the ‘Heaven’ behind (of regression). The ‘high Nirvana’ is quite different from the ‘low Nirvana’ even though many clinicians confuse them.” (Maslow, 1968)

Perhaps I need briefly to explain who Abraham H. Maslow (1908–1970) was. In his early youth, Maslow was interested in what he had described as ‘the mystic experience’ that he had experienced from time to time. With his personal interest on the topic, he researched his own ‘mystic experience’, which was so intense that it left him weeping. His original paper on self-actualization described his experience of ‘limitless horizons opening up’, together with ‘ecstasy and wonder and awe’. Maslow devoted his whole life to research in this area.

In 1943, he published two papers, which were only more widely known in 1954 when they were reprinted in two chapters of his *Motivation and Personality*. In essence, he made two observations: (1) Human being is hosted to one motive or another, at any given time. As soon as one motive was satisfied, another motive immediately ‘pops up to take its place’; (2) Such motives are hierarchically structured, predefined by their respective level of urgency (such as biological needs for survival), intensity or priority. Maslow labelled this link as ‘prepotent’, from the noun ‘prepotency’. The more prepotent, the more the biologically urgent and clamorous motives take priority.

Figure 1 shows the hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow (Maslow, 1954). Among the needs, self-actualization stands at the very top of the list. It is the highest need that humans strive for, according to Maslow.

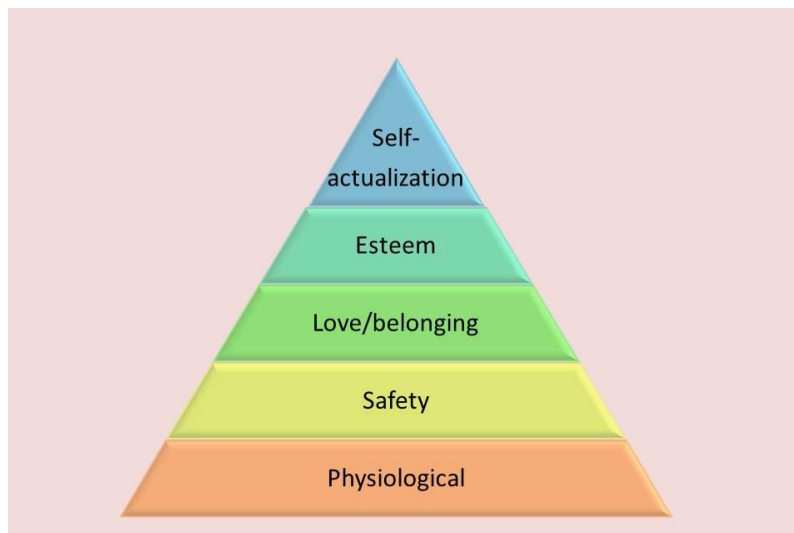


Figure 1 Maslow's original hierarchy of needs

However, Maslow noted that those basic needs are highly diverse: they cover the gut drives of hunger, thirst and so on, and further include more distinctively human needs such as love and self-esteem. Those are needs for something which are motivated by deficiency. “In fact, these deficiency motives colour our perceptions of reality. This distorts our dealings with reality by causing us to make demands of it: ‘Feed me! Love me! Respect me!’ The greater our need for food, safety, affection and self-esteem, the more we will see and treat the items of reality, including ourselves and other people, in accordance with their respective abilities to facilitate or obstruct the satisfaction of that need.” (Maslow, 1968: 90).

Dr Covey, in the foreword of Pattakos’ book (2010), commented that Maslow came to the idea near the end of his life that self-actualization was not the highest need. In the end, he concluded that self-transcendence was the human soul’s highest need, which reflected more the spirit of Frankl. Maslow’s wife, Bertha, and his research associates put together his final thinking along these lines in the book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Maslow, 1971) (see Figure 2 below).

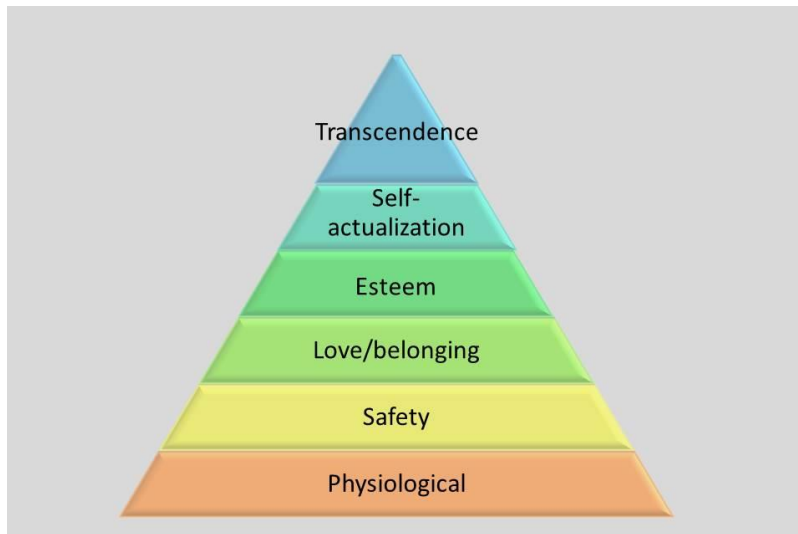


Figure 2 Maslow's expanded hierarchy of needs

### **Matching with the after-effects**

It seemed to me that it was not only the process of the miraculous, mysterious experience that resembled what Maslow had described as peak experience. In fact, the after-effects of it were also similar to what Maslow had described in 1968 after summarizing the experience of the research subjects who had similar experience. I compared my own experience to his categories:

#### **1. Therapeutic effect**

Yes, there were therapeutic effects on my sadness and depression due to the loss of a friend. There was also reduction of self-blame or guilty feeling about whatever I had done to contribute to the loss, knowingly or unknowingly.

#### **2. Change the person's view in a healthy direction**

Yes, I felt more confident with everything about me. Such confidence enriched me with power to survive in any situation.

#### **3. Change view of other people and one's relationship with others**

Yes, I became more compassionate towards other people. It was the result of my 'rubricizing' (or categorizing) of people and understanding that they mostly are not well aware of what they are doing or, even they are aware, it is not an easy task to change personal behaviour.

#### **4. Change more or less permanently one's view of the world, or aspects or part of it**

Yes, I changed my worldview to a more humanistic, existentialist and phenomenological one. It allowed me to understand my paradigm of life and for life. In Frankl's terms, I had searched and found meaning.

#### **5. Release one for greater creativity, spontaneity, expressiveness and idiosyncrasy**

Yes, I became more spontaneous, with more confidence to be myself and not to wear a mask for different occasions. I was more expressive in appealing to people to think of doing

things for others which fosters growth and self-transcendence. Occasionally I was poetic in expressing my thought. This was how I regained my energy to write this book and share the experiences of my fellow volunteers and the profound impact that my work with those in pain has helped me. I have also felt challenged to find the words to express my experience so that I will not be misunderstood and metaphors have assisted me in this. I have also found the courage to take the risk of being misunderstood and believe this to be part of the process of being honest and congruent.

**6. Remember the experience as a very important and desirable happening and seeks to repeat it**

Yes, I can remember the experience that was so unforgettable. Although I do not deliberately seek such an experience again, I continue with my work and new found consciousness to improve my professional practices and relationships with people. Perhaps some people never experience such moments. I feel grateful that I did, even if it will only be that once.

**7. Apt to feel that life in general is worthwhile, even if it is usually drab, pedestrian, painful or ungratifying. Since beauty, excitement, honesty, playfulness, goodness, truth and meaningfulness have been demonstrated to exist. Thus, life itself is validated, and suicide and the death-wish must become less likely**

Yes, I felt more positive about life no matter whether it is the easy, the tough, the good or bad. My capacity for adaptability and acceptance has increased. I reflect often on the purpose of pain more than I did before and what learning we can take from it when it does happen. Otherwise we suffer for nothing, it is wasted. It can be an opening to a different way of life, an awakening to things we have been passing by. The feeling of alignment with the universe as holistic, self-reinforced my understanding on what the real excitement, goodness and true meaning of various things were. Life was validated with me as self-evident.

**8. In the peak experience, most here-and-now, free of the past and future in various senses, most 'all there' in the experience. One can listen better than at other times. One is least habitual and least expectant, one can full listen without contamination by dragging in expectations based on past situations, hopes or apprehensions based on planning for the future**

Yes, I was mindful about the importance of living in the present moment. It seemed to have reinforced my practice on mindfulness. The basic breathing-in and breathing out techniques were living reminders for me. Although I was not practising sitting meditation, I was always able to clear my mind from ruminating in the past emotion or spinning my thoughts with uncontrolled story lines generated from my imagination. Life is more solid without much effect carried forward from the past (except the miraculous experience) and expectation for the future.

The process of my experience or the after-effects of the experience were identified as what Maslow described as peak experience which was later referred to as self-transcendence experience by his wife (Maslow, 1971), by Frankl (1967) and by Pattakos (2010). I am not

sure whether it was mountain peak or foothill experience, as there was not the chance to compare any similar experience. However, its after-effect is enough to be going on with, as it has had quite an impact on my life. However, I believe, from the bottom of my heart, that the specialness of that moment was the experience of 'selflessness'.

**9. One is also beyond desire, one needn't rubricize in terms of fear, hate or wishes. No one compares what is here with what is not here in order to evaluate.**

Yes, I 'rubricize' or categorize people according to whether they are B-motivated (B stands for being) or D-motivated (D-stands for Deficiency). i.e. whether they live for growth and development or they live their life for satisfying their deficiency in lives such as needs, fear, wish etc. I shall explain this more in the next chapter.

### **Selflessness**

Only as man withdraws from himself in the sense of releasing self-centered interest and attention will he gain an authentic mode of existence.

(Frankl, in *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, 1967: 56)

I recognized that the moment of complete 'selflessness' was the most significant status that I attained during the mysterious moment. It was the ability to purify my thoughts and my whole being into a selfless state that allowed me to align with other eternal qualities of being, such as love, generosity, creativity and wisdom. I wish to emphasize that 'selflessness' was the foundation of wisdom and a key to the universe. It seemed to have its place in Kensho or Satori, in terms of Zen Buddhism or in Nirvana. According to Maslow, Nirvana:

is a Buddhist word whose original meaning refers to the extinction or blowing out of a lamp or the flame of a candle. It is the highest form of consciousness, a transcendent state of freedom resulting from the extinction of desire and the blowing out of illusions, in particular, the illusion of an individual self or ego. (Maslow, 1968: 170)

I confess that, although I was taught since my childhood that we, humans, should not be selfish, I was not taught to be selfless! To be selfish, I think that it is referring to a state of mind when a person is always devoted to or caring only for oneself or primarily with one's own interests, benefits or welfare, regardless of others. However, to be selfless seems to be something more noble than, but includes, not being selfish. It includes the unimportance and non-existence of oneself. As Viktor Frankl mentioned above, only as man withdraws from himself in the sense of releasing self-centred interest and attention will he gain an authentic mode of existence. Selflessness is related to our mode of existence, which also relates to human potential as Maslow (1968) also stated that human being needs to be selfless and stepping out from its 'humanness' nature of protecting themselves, in order to find its human potential.

Selfless is not only an action of unselfishness; it is more a state of mind that we can step out of our own interest. In fact, Maslow (1968: 203) also stated:



for cognition to be complete, it must be detached, disinterested, desireless and unmotivated. Only in this state of mind humans perceive the object in its own nature with its own objective and intrinsic characteristic instead of interpreting the objects according to one's own thoughts on its usefulness or safety risk or applications.

It seems to me that my perception of the importance of 'selflessness' was not a coincidence and that I could explore more on this area for the rest of my life.

### **One possible reason for longevity of service**

To round up my experience and understanding on selflessness, suffering empathy and wisdom, I think that one of the reasons for some Hotline volunteers to serve so long is that their regular practice of providing empathic responses to clients and their commitment to understanding clients' suffering have triggered their intrinsic drive to follow the path of a selfless life. Their practice of empathy, which is a state of selflessness to get rid of one's own interest and to open one self and mind to occupy others, stimulates their thoughts to gradually look for wisdom of life, which is closely related to selflessness. It may be something that they might not have had any thoughts about before, as most people are not aware of such a relationship. However, as they were unconsciously practising in this direction, they might only understand that they have an internal drive to help other people as far as possible. They were willing to sacrifice their other activities in order to fulfil the demanding requirements of SBHK to maintain their volunteer membership. However, they might not be aware of the benefits of such practice towards understanding the wisdom of life. They just follow their heart to continue the service.

## Chapter 12 – The gift to us from those struggling to live

The impact of my personal life was not an event in isolation. My thirty years in SBHK helping clients with their problems were the foundation of my resilience in the face of adversity, which would have had a different outcome had it not been for the reflection and insight that I had accumulated over those precious years from the many clients who contacted us and from the colleagues who supported each other.

The stories that have been shared have stimulated me to reflect on them to try to extract some learning for volunteers, clients and me. These are my reflections and interpretations, and are not intended in any way to psychologize my fellow volunteers. They are only to extract commonalities and learnings that perhaps might help us to use some of this accumulated practical wisdom to inform the ongoing development of SBHK.

Together with some studies in the literature, I summarize below five major areas that might hint, during the intake or selection of volunteers as well as day-to-day running of SBHK and similar organizations, at the possible long stay of volunteers in the service. The reasons for the retention of volunteers can be considered: first, how personal prerequisites such as childhood experience affect their passion to serve; secondly, their motives, satisfaction and perceived meaningfulness of the task; thirdly, how volunteers play their roles among themselves to encourage their retention within the organization; fourthly, how the policy and management style of the organization facilitated their long stay or retention. Last but not the least is a testimony of the ancient Greek philosophy of *eudaimonia* that engagement in virtue, such as exercising empathy in counselling work, is a journey for people to achieve intrinsic goodness as an end (*praxis*) or as a process (*poiesis*) to attain the highest state of happiness in human beings.

### **How personal prerequisites affect the passion to serve suicidal clients**

#### ***Generosity and independence***

One female volunteer displayed a very generous life attitude by helping her very young neighbour to travel to school every day for several years when she was young. It was an extraordinary unconditional service that she offered. Her selflessness and humble attitude in early childhood reflected a very passionate, helping heart. Her independence in making such a decision was also a remarkable one which, I think, was also contributed to by her mother's trust.

Two male volunteers also each had an independent childhood that provided them with experiences to face various situations, including adversity. Their courage and experience were vital for Hotline clients, as most are not decisive enough when facing such situations.

However, less independent volunteers might understand the generally non-decisive clients more. It is inconclusive whether an independent childhood could help to bring about long-serving volunteers.

### ***Parental attitudes***

There were stringent, authoritative and conservative parents, as well as liberal and considerate parents. The effect of different parenting styles might not be so clear cut as to affect the passion of volunteers. However, experiencing different parenting styles did affect the development of volunteers. Therefore, it is more important to know if volunteers understand how their parents had affected their development. Such information is vital to the self-awareness of volunteers and perhaps how they understand parental influence in their clients.

### ***Peer-group introduction***

Three volunteers among the eleven volunteers examined in this research were introduced to SBHK by ex-SBHK members. The involvement of ex-members might help as a 'buddy' outside SBHK who could help to provide sufficient information for potential volunteers even prior to their joining the service. As a result of a clear or better understanding of the service, their expectation of obtaining satisfaction through the existing policy or facilities of the service was addressed and the chance of their retention in the service was deemed to be higher. This situation matches the opinion of Hyde et al. (2014), in which the retention of novice volunteers could be higher if their satisfaction and social connections could be improved, in this case by trusted friends of the volunteers who understood the operation of SBHK well.

### ***Past emotional experience***

Two volunteers had been helped by a teacher or social worker in their childhood to understand the importance and power of active listening. Another two volunteers had personal experience of cases of suicide. It appears that such experiences do have some influence on the choice to serve in a suicide prevention agency. Their attention to the need for a compassionate life seemed to be brought to a more conscious level in their life. They seem to be more ready to live a compassionate life by helping strangers. In fact, helping strangers is one of the best ways for people to recover from childhood adversity (Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Therefore, exploration of such element in choosing volunteers might have a positive return for long-serving volunteers.

## **Motive, satisfaction, perceived meaningfulness of the task and personal growth and development of volunteer**

### ***Satisfaction on self or other-oriented motives***

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of the satisfaction level of volunteers. Lammer (1991) noticed that volunteers enjoyed the responsibility of handling a challenging service or an interesting task. This echoes March and Simon's (1958) finding on the feeling of job satisfaction and compatibility in the service. Stevens (1991) stated that satisfaction could come from their perceived recognition and appreciation by other people. As volunteers are human, it is not difficult to understand that they would be more willing to remain in a service in which they feel satisfied. In fact, it would be difficult to understand why volunteers would stay in a service in which no satisfaction could be felt.

For instance, a self-oriented motive is important for novice volunteers and other-oriented motives for sustained volunteering (Handy et al., 2006). Alexander (2000) views that the volunteers who joined a service for altruistic reason would serve longer, while Omoto and Snyder (1993) acknowledge that volunteers joining for self-esteem and growth might stay longer. The literature supporting different motives is quite diverse and it might also depend on what kind of voluntary service they were involved in. Although I tend to agree with the discovery of Mesch, Tschirhart, Perry and Lee (1998), that volunteers joining a service for the opportunity to learn more for their career development foresee quitting, whether their expectations were finally satisfied or not, Rubin and Thorelli (1984) discovered that volunteers might change their motivations during their service. This makes the motive-related theories unsolid. Furthermore, sometimes it may be difficult to categorize whether volunteers joining for other-oriented motive are purely helping others or are obtaining satisfaction from helping others. The latter might render an 'other-oriented' motive a self-oriented one!

### **Meaningful task**

A number of studies, such as those by Hackman and Oldham (1976) and Gidron (1985), conclude the importance of a meaningful job to attract and retain volunteers. However, it is not surprising to see an exception to this by Mesch et al. (1998), who state that perceived meaningfulness does not have a significant influence on retention for stipended volunteers. In fact, five out of eleven volunteers expressed their perceived meaningfulness of the task in SBHK. I think that it would be rather difficult to convince a volunteer to carry out a voluntary duty for over twenty years if the volunteer could not perceive the meaning of the task. No doubt, helping others, in particular preventing another from injuring themselves, is indisputably a virtue, per se.

### **Feelings of personal growth and development**

Members generally agreed that their experience of 'helping others helps myself'. They gained a wide spectrum of knowledge about the service. They understood the pacing of the society and obtained knowledge which they might not be able to acquire through their daily lives or professional careers.

Some members reported that interaction with clients had reminded them of how to avoid getting into similar adverse situations to the clients. They felt the benefit of growing and developing their insights, skills, personalities and potential under this service environment. They had the chance to improve their counselling skills and to carry out other non-Hotline duties, such as being trainers, group leaders or executive committee members. All these opportunities allowed them to feel their growth and development together with the service. In fact, Aristotle acknowledged the intrinsic drive of humans to feel happy with the success in growth, even vegetative as a plant or appetitive as an animal, and more uniquely being rational as a human being (Cooper, 2012; Curnow, 2010). Feelings of personal growth when serving in the organization would foster members staying with it. This may not be instigated only by the member or the organization, but also the nature of the service.

## **How volunteers play their roles among themselves to encourage retention**

### ***Overcoming difficulties by bonding with other members***

A number of volunteers experienced difficult periods at the beginning of their service. They lacked confidence in handling clients and they thought of leaving the service. However, they did not leave, as they were able to find support from fellow volunteers who were serving at the same time. The offer of direct support after handling cases or the bonds of friendship developed in the same team of volunteers did have a great impact on their retention.

Therefore, it is fair to say that the kindness of befriending within the organization is an important factor for volunteer retention, and should be formalized and encouraged.

### **Devotion to client**

The general attitude to devoting time and patience to clients was common among long-serving volunteers. In fact, some of them extended their devotion by committing more effort to the benefit of clients, such as further studying of counselling or organizing extra overnight service to meet demand. This attitudinal commitment shows loyalty and willingness in volunteers to make extra efforts for the organization (Guest, 1992). Such devotion might set an example to other volunteers, or they might allow other volunteers to be touched by their selfless and unconditional offer. Such personal initiative of volunteers should be encouraged and made known to other volunteers.

## **How the policy and management style of the organization facilitates long-stay retention**

### ***Goal of the organization***

Suicide prevention as the goal of SBHK already provides a very good ground for the retention of volunteers. Most agreed with the mission of the organization and considered that there is a social need to provide such a service. There is resonance between the organization and the members to achieve the goal (Sokolowski, 1996) which fosters the long stay by volunteers. The perceived meaningfulness of the service would continue to drive them, as Hackman and Oldham (1976), as well as Gidron (1985), suggest. The nature of the service, involving handling life and death cases and the need to maintain the confidentiality of cases, increases the challenge and volunteers' interest in maintaining membership, as suggested by Lammer (1991), and March and Simon (1958). Therefore, it is important for SBHK and any organization with a perceived meaningful service to maintain their goals and missions in order to keep the attraction for volunteers.

Since 2000, SBHK expanded from a single volunteer-based hotline centre to four centres upon the addition of the SCIC, LEC and Caring Funds. All are staff-based centres, and there is a need to maintain the original goal of the organization and, more importantly, the role of volunteers

in the overall organizational structure so that they can continue to feel that they make a contribution to organizational tasks.

### **The SERVER model**

The management style of SBHK in many aspects has been in compliance with McCudden's SERVER model (2000). Its ability to retain so many volunteers to serve for more than twenty to thirty years is also a fact. It appears that the SERVER model sets a good example of what an organization needs to do in order to provide the right working environment to nurture long-serving volunteers. There is a need for continuous, professional and flexible supporting structures of training and supervision. There should be an open, transparent and documented volunteering policy. Volunteers are given opportunities to change their roles to meet their needs at different stages of their development. The development into group leader, debriefer, lecturer, trainer, role-play facilitator or even director is possible without any mandatory requirements. Thus, they could explore their various potentials in a safe environment.

In addition, there should be a regular and open evaluation and monitoring system to ensure the quality and commitment of the volunteer, especially in a suicide prevention agency, as their quality of work has to be accountable to the public. This provides additional challenge and responsibility to volunteers, and is considered fruitful in their retention (Lammer, 1991; March & Simon, 1958). Lastly, there should be personal and professional relationships founded on openness, understanding and genuineness among members and management personnel.

### **An organization to be proud of**

The long history of SBHK (55 years, as at 2015) is a solid foundation of the organization. However, if I go back to the year that the long-serving volunteers joined, SBHK was just twenty to thirty years old. If serving in an organization of which one is proud is a factor for retention, SBHK has had to maintain this status since that time. In retrospect, SBHK maintained its philosophy of focusing on quality rather than quantity when recruiting, selecting and training volunteers. Qualified volunteers were proud of their worker status and their ability to handle critical suicidal clients. Society at large also acknowledged the overall performance of this organization, and support for the organization has never ceased. The successful expansion to service centres, with more professional staff and governmental support in providing subvention to the SCIC, has also given confidence to volunteers to serve such a well-regarded organization. The extent of SBHK's present level of staffing (staff and volunteers) and its financial capital render it one of the largest suicide prevention NGOs in the world.

Good reputation and acknowledgement by the public is a by-product of the good work of an organization. It cannot be fostered intentionally, but will be built up as time goes on. I think that making an organization to be proud of through volunteering is a reminder to the management of any organization to protect its history and reputation. This is achieved by ensuring good quality in volunteers and in their performance through the management system. Reputation needs to be built over years of good work, yet can be ruined in one day!

## **Flexibility and autonomy**

### ***Great flexibility and autonomy for volunteers provides them with a sense of freedom***

Everyone in the world likes the sense of freedom. Such freedom reduces stress among recruits during their years of service. Hong Kong, in particular, is a small but metropolitan city. Living here is very dynamic, as physical access to anywhere in Hong Kong is not at all time consuming. Therefore, people enjoy fast and multiple activities. Flexibility in rostering and appraisals in the Hotline service allows volunteers to meet their different needs or even cope with major changes in their lives. This will, of course, enhance the long stay of volunteers. The flexibility of the therapeutic approach in the service, changes in volunteer roles and even the chance to become directors to oversee the development of the organization testify to the high level of autonomy of volunteers. The level of trust is mutually beneficial to both volunteers and organization. It seems to be a very important factor in the retention of volunteers.

## **Physical needs**

A convenient location of the service centre is recommended by Gidron (1983), and is similar to the easy transportation access insisted upon by the management of SBHK to prevent unnecessary volunteer turnover. Monetary subsidies, as suggested by Knapp and Davis Smith (1995), are useful to have and, of course, this is subject to the financial status of the organization. However, in case of SBHK, some volunteers even donate their transportation allowance to the organization, which renders this element less definitive than expected. Nevertheless, some physical needs such as a comfortable working environment, seat or bed (for rest), computer and Wi-Fi, snacks and drinks might fulfil some physical needs of the volunteers. Reasonable provision of materials to suit the personal needs of volunteers might not have the same weight in retaining volunteers as the provision of a flexible and autonomous working environment. However, it indicates the care given to the volunteers and reduces any dissatisfaction that might be felt by them. Any organization that can afford it should endeavour to satisfy such needs.

## **Explicit reasons**

From the above considerations, I think that keeping the autonomous volunteer-friendly management style in an organization is a more important factor than identifying the correct personal attributes of volunteers at recruitment. In fact, few of the terms of service of volunteers reported in the literature were reflected in those volunteers who had served for twenty to thirty years or more in a single organization. The factors that were quoted might not be totally compatible with the SBHK case. Nevertheless, some were still meant to explain the longevity of volunteers, especially those on the role of the organization, where SBHK did display similar roles.

In terms of the personal prerequisites mentioned above, I can only accept some of them as possible characteristics or personal histories that an organization might take into consideration during recruitment. Human beings change every day. There is no fair chance that anyone is able to predict which new recruit will go on to serve thirty years or more in future. However, an organization can still provide a good environment to nurture potential volunteers. As suggested above, a number of continuous works by the organization have to be undertaken to foster an environment where volunteers come to the service as a habit in their daily life and treat the organization as part of their family.

### **Intrinsic drive on a journey for wisdom of life being activated through the regular selflessness service**

#### ***Tacit reasons***

Having concluded which factors are generally perceived and understood by volunteers themselves, as one of the long-serving volunteers I discovered a further reason for the longevity of service that volunteers might be unaware of. Very similar to the concept of 'helping others helps myself', which was mostly agreed on by the volunteers, this suicide prevention hotline service provides an environment for the growth and development of the volunteers. Such feelings of growth and development were actually experienced by the volunteers as a positive factor for the stay with the service. Indeed, I would say that such feelings echoed their intrinsic and natural drive in this direction. As Aristotle stated, human beings can find their happiness through three aspects of the soul, namely the vegetative part like a plant, the appetitive part like an animal and the rational part unique to human beings. That was the reason why they appreciated the service so much and some of them even thought that what they gained was more than they contributed to their clients. However, Aristotle added that the ultimate happiness of humans should come from their unique rational faculties.

Perhaps the feeling of enlightenment felt by Joyce or the peacefulness felt by Stephen (tranquillity by Pyrrho, in Curnow, 2010: 104) are not a totally a transcendence experience. They could be another manifestation of the extraordinary happiness reported by Joyce and my personal experience, as well as my literature search thereafter (James, 1901; Maslow, 1978; Speeth, 1989), which inevitably provide testimony for the peak experience or transcendental enlightenment that occasionally occurs to some people. During his lifetime, Maslow interviewed and researched more than ninety people who had had such experiences. In fact, the message that all these people bring to us is very similar: that is, they found the wisdom of life.

While people enjoy the feelings of growth and development, they also enjoy the feeling of becoming wiser. It is a natural tendency in everyone. However, the only secret that I have found from the research is the relationship between selflessness and wisdom. I should not treat it as a secret, since the literature is readily available. The only difference is whether they can be linked up in a more understandable manner and whether ordinary people pay attention to such phenomena.



While my transcendental experience reminded me of the importance of selflessness, and a number of studies by Maxwell (2007), Husserl (1931), Moustakas (1994), Maslow (1954, 1968, 1970), Pearce (2002) and Pattakos (2010) supported the idea of the importance of selflessness in achieving wisdom or the lack of sensation of our ordinary self during the mystic experience, as suggested by James (1901), MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79) and perhaps Young-Eisendrath (1996) provided me with an excellent link between wisdom and counselling activities. With my Hotline experience that emphasize empathy, the linkage between all the elements was revealed more clearly:

Counselling as a wisdom-fostering activity (MacDonald, 2009: 79) requires the exercise of empathy (Mearns & Thorne, 1988); empathy is a practice of selflessness; selflessness is a mental state with a basic contraction of ego (Speeth, 1989), achieving sufficient selflessness experience (Maslow, 1970; Young-Eisendrath, 1996), plus some knowledge of positivity, such as logotherapy, mindfulness, positive psychology (in my case), would give a higher chance of obtaining peak experience when under intense suffering – the second line of work in the school of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff (ibid.). With the peak experience, the wisdom and joy of life are appreciated (Confucius, in Hinett, 2002: v), and this is supported by Aristotle's ethics of *eudaimonia*, where the exercise of human virtue (selflessness, as I generalise it) is a means (*poiesis*) that could lead human to a higher level of being, where ultimate happiness and theoretical wisdom of life is found. (Cooper, 2012). Figure 3 below indicates the relationship between selflessness, *eudaimonia* and wisdom.

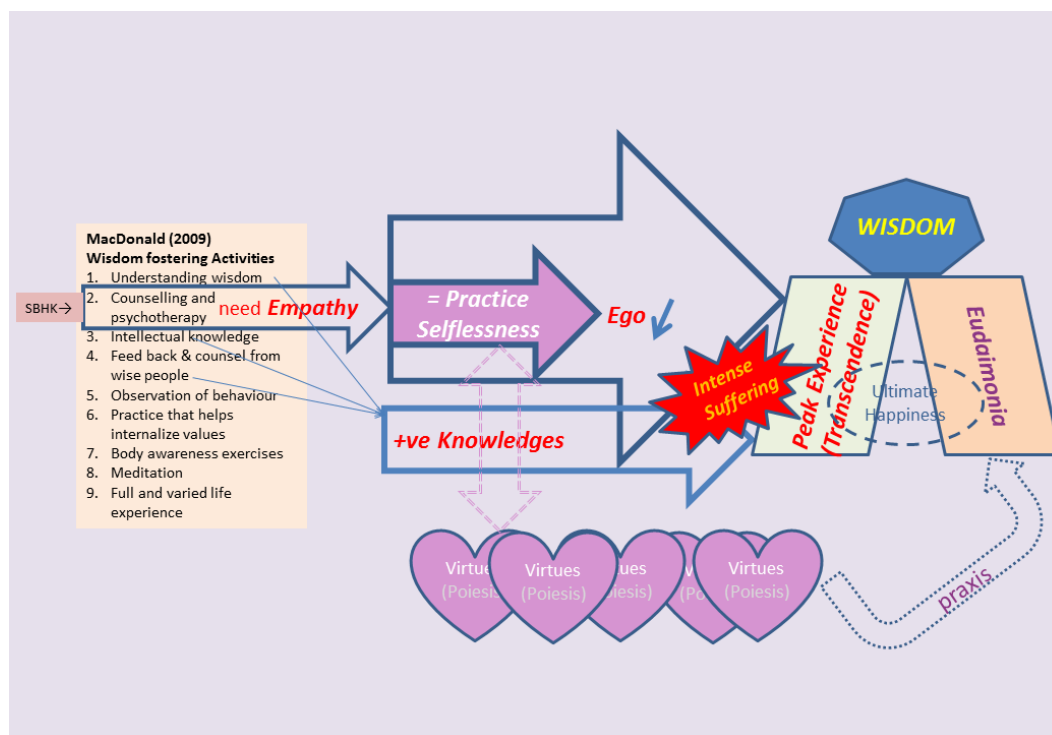


Figure 3 Relationship between empathy, selflessness, *eudaimonia* and wisdom

The nature of service on a suicide prevention hotline requires volunteers to be empathic with clients in times of intense suffering, so the effort of volunteers to empathize with them is more demanding than other services that are not life and death related. The extent of selflessness and empathy provided by volunteers in such roles and situations can be very intense as a person's life is at stake and the person's choice of to live or die is deeply influenced by the counsellor or helping individual. I think that such performance by volunteers is expressed commonly as a more challenging task, whereby volunteers would be interested to carry on when they felt the satisfaction of accomplishment (Lammers, 1991; March and Simon, 1958). However, there could be a hidden joy in being selfless that volunteers feel implicitly and do not express.

With the support of the ancient Greek philosophers' views, I think that the real driving force for the volunteers to continue might not be overcoming challenging tasks but a natural drive to practise human virtue. Beside *praxis* (an end) on the surface, it is also *poiesis* (a means) unconsciously deep down to seek for *eudaimonia* (*ultimate happiness*), which should be in terms of rationality (rather than vegetative or appetitive) for human beings, as Aristotle stated. Such rationality could be achieved when humans acquire the right knowledge to understand the true functioning of human beings in the world.

With such knowledge, which is the importance of selflessness, or with sufficient selflessness, humans can see things more clearly and therefore can make wise decisions. This was why Socrates mentioned that no man who had once learned the truth (nature of virtue) would be stupid enough to act contrary to it, for he would be acting against his own interests. The research by Maslow and Pearce, as well as Joyce's and my personal peak experience, support the likelihood of the *eudaimonic* state of happiness, even in the form of a split-second peak experience when all the human goodness and even the human existence in the universe are reportedly felt. According to Maslow (1978), Pearce (2002) and my experience, such peak experience involves an element of selflessness for its occurrence. This is why I appeal for the practise of selflessness in this book. The more people that practise selflessness, the closer they are to the destiny of wisdom. This is also supported by the experience of Young-Eisendrath (1996) and the third tier of work proposed in the school established by Gurdjieff (Speeth, 1989).

Among other things, five of the volunteers mentioned that they were engaged in Buddhist meditation or mindfulness practice. These activities are all also wisdom-fostering activities, as suggested by MacDonald (2009: 79). It appears that the drive by long-serving volunteers at SBHK to seek for ultimate human wisdom is clearly apparent. As the environment of SBHK asks of them the regular practice of empathy and that the individuals achieved some sense of peace or congruence in the constant drawing on their energies to help others.

### **Overall summary**

As mentioned earlier, while the original intention of this research was to study the attributes of long-serving volunteers, the results indicate that most had a general attitude to helping other people. This could have been initiated by a number of factors, personal, social, cultural, life events and how they responded to them among other things. Only some past emotional

experience, whether related to suicide cases or not, might have some impact on the volunteers' original intention to join the service. We might pay special attention to generous, helping behaviour in childhood, which might be a magnification of the general helping attitude mentioned above. However, an independent childhood might not be such a conclusive hint for longevity. Nevertheless, predicting the longevity of service extending to a period of twenty to thirty years or more from such personal attributes is quite unsatisfactory, as life and personal characteristics over such a long time invariably change. It is no way to conclude how important these attributes are.

There are roles that volunteers within the organization could take up which might foster their overall longevity of service. The mutually supportive atmosphere among volunteers in this research and the uncompetitive relationships create genuine and long-lasting friendships. Furthermore, the common goal of suicide prevention and their devotion to clients through fulfilling their duties or even making extra efforts such as self-study on counselling and carrying out extra overnight duties did have a positive effect on their mutual encouragement. Building such bonds among workers is important to the retention of volunteers.

More important is the management style of the organization, which should be more volunteer-friendly. A transparent, open and documented volunteer policy is essential for basic communication within the organization. A flexible and autonomous working environment, such as for rosters, appraisals, counselling approaches and different roles taken by volunteers within the organization, is appreciated by volunteers. Some physical needs, such as providing a convenient location, and daily rations and utilities, increase the comfort of the service. Maintaining the good reputation of the organization and the quality of work, to make the volunteers proud of their volunteer status in the perceived meaningful service, are also important for their long stay.

One last tacit element that breeds long-serving volunteers in a counselling agency might be the intrinsic drive for growth and development of volunteers. This matches the ingredients to provide selfless and empathetic support to clients. In my opinion, such regular practice of selflessness creates the conditions for an unintentional journey towards a state of wisdom. With suitable knowledge, reflection and accumulation of selfless practice, they are on a journey to transcend themselves at the arrival of the right situation. Their stay in the service is a natural path that they come across through supporting their own intrinsic drive towards a better life of wisdom, ultimate happiness or *eudaimonia*.

# Personal reflection on the findings

## Empathy-suffering-meaning-transcendence-empathy

Frankl saw human beings rising to heights of compassion and caring in what can only be described as miraculous acts of unselfishness and transcendence. (Pattakos, 2010: 183)

I have discussed empathy as a means to practise selflessness, suffering as a prerequisite for feeling our own existence, meaning as a token to bear any suffering and transcendence, or peak experience, as a final stage of the maturity attained. In fact, they are all interrelated. When people suffer in the encultured world, they need to have faith to understand and believe that there is a reason for their suffering. This thought would one day allow them to transcend their suffering. Hence, they can have empathy for their suffering and perhaps empathize with the person who leads to their suffering. With more experience in exercising empathy to oneself or to others, people learn a better way to face and transcend suffering. Hence, it is a cycle of learning. This is what exactly Young-Eisendrath, a psychologist, self-decried as having 'invested thousands of hours in listening to people talk about their problems and the themes that revolve around them', has appealed for in her book, *The Gifts of Suffering, Finding Insight, Compassion, and Renewal*. (Young-Eisendrath, 1996).

SBHK is a suicide prevention organization serving clients with the most intense suffering. To meet the needs of clients, volunteers apply empathy to their greatest extent in order to help them. They carry out the service selflessly and focus on assisting the client. They work together to try to understand the meaning of the suffering of the clients and at the same time, they experience their own suffering of time, effort and patience when handling clients. They transcend or overcome the difficulties from time to time, but sometimes they still experience unsuccessful outcomes, whether or not the clients stretch them to their limits of patience. It is not surprising that this sort of service makes volunteers practise selflessness and thus have more opportunity to come close to the edge of a wisdom-fostering activities, as MacDonald (2009) suggested.

### **Maslow: Earnings to transcendence**

Although the term 'earnings to transcendence' used by Maslow is not in common English usage, I agree with Maslow (1970) that many people are practising B-motivation daily. Authors such as Gurdjieff (Speeth, 1989), Oupensky (1997) Maxwell (2009), MacDonald (2009), Husserl (1970) Maslow (1968, 1970), Young-Eisendrath (1996), Pattakos (2010) and Pearce (2002), as I mentioned, are striving to reach such an ideal destiny, which the ancient Greek philosophers had long been advocating. They are a minority, but are persistent and hardworking in running against the enculturated worldview that focuses on putative goods for self-benefit. They follow their heart to practise moral virtues, eternal values and attributes without fear of being laughed at by the majority of people in the superficial world or the floating world described by the Japanese. The work and the striving they have undertaken have earned them credit. It is like buying a ticket to a final destination and whether they can arrive there depends on how much earnings they have. If they have earned sufficient 'selflessness', their chance to reach the final

destination of their full potential, the unity of the universe or the place where true wisdom rests, *eudaimonia*, is higher. Unfortunately, no one knows how much earnings or credits is sufficient to enable people to arrive at the destination. The only way we can do so is to keep earning and practising selflessness as far as possible.

The spirit of the SBHK and that of all the Samaritans worldwide, and perhaps similar organizations, share the aim of helping strangers; that is, helping someone who you really do not know. When we see someone in physical or emotional distress, we exercise unconditional positive regard to approach the victims. We put aside our lives, our engagements, our time, our bitter past experiences, our calculations for the future as well as our needs, and attend to the present needs of the victims. Somehow, we believe that such behaviour is humanistic in nature. It is what humans should do to fulfil their lives and to achieve ultimate wisdom through the wholehearted practice of selflessness.

Indeed, this is not anything new. It is a traditional moral virtue that many people exercise daily. The only thing which is new today is, perhaps, my direct appeal to everyone in the world to practise 'selflessness'; the sharing of my experience with my knowledge and my reflection on examples in the twenty-first century with regard to my role as a Samaritan Befriender. It is also important for everyone to know that we do not need to be a psychologist in order to be a great person. Every great person in history started their life as an ordinary person. No one was born with a halo. We are no different from many other more well-known transcendent people in the past: Albert Einstein, St Joan of Arc, Viktor Frankl, Mother Teresa, and many other unknown people who started their average lives, yet earned their credit during their lifetime for final transcendence.

Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist of the early 1890s who founded analytical psychology, reached the conclusion near the end of his life, when he described the final goal of our development as the discovery or intuition of an 'empty centre'. At the end of his autobiography, he wrote: 'There is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things' (Jung, 1961: 359).

While I acknowledge that the most common insight of being a Samaritan Befriender volunteer is the opportunity for self-growth through the experience of 'helping others helps myself', I believe that this is not only the most fruitful reward for the volunteers. In fact, the 'selflessness' of the volunteers in providing the service for those people living at the verge of life and death situations allows them a greater chance to transcend their status. With appropriate wisdom-related knowledge and their reflection and reflexivity, they acquire more wisdom to understand their own and others' potentials, and hence live a better life in the world.

Before I drop my pen (keyboard) to finish this writing, I really want to thank Abraham Maslow for his assistance in helping me to understand what I had been undergoing. Without his lifelong study on self-actualization and sharing of his knowledge, I would not have been able to

translate my experience and knowledge in the right words, especially in English, to allow my sharing in a common language.

Although Maslow passed away some forty years ago, in writing the book I had a feeling of discussing the issue with him. This was especially the case when I read his publications of 1968 and 1970. The subtle changes in his attitude towards the importance of transcendence over self-actualization rendered a space for me to explore with him. When I was puzzling on the difference between self-actualization and transcendence, he explained his view through the data that he had received. It was a marvellous experience. It allowed me to understand what and where I am among the people whom he interviewed. I may not fully agree with or understand Maslow on his interpretation of self-actualization (it may be due to my poor standard of English!) However, I really admire his passion and work to spend a lifetime on this heavenly subject. He might have proposed his B (Being) and D (deficiency) concept as a school of thought in psychology. However, he might not be aware how significant it is for the understanding of selflessness and wisdom. I just followed his thought to elaborate the importance of selflessness and gave examples of what selflessness in everyday life.

Again, I admire the passion of Pearce, who insisted on sharing his thoughts on the exploration of human potential. He demonstrated the spirit of scientific study to triangulate knowledge from different fields in order to provide validation of a phenomenon. I could only appropriate his knowledge at a very superficial level. His search and study on transcendence of the physical human body goes well beyond my level of transcendence. Perhaps, one day, transcendence of transcendence might be possible!

You may contact me at the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong, or email me at [vincentkan@sbhk.org.hk](mailto:vincentkan@sbhk.org.hk) for comments or sharing.

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## Appendix – Twenty Principles of the Samaritan Befrienders

(Dated 22 January 1976, published in SBHK Annual Report 1979)

1. The Samaritans are a worldwide fellowship of volunteers dedicated to the prevention of suicide and the alleviation of the loneliness and depression that may lead to it, by making their befriending immediately available at any hour of the day or night to those who feel they have no one else to turn to in their distress.
2. The befriending which the volunteer offers to the caller is the personal concern of a compassionate fellow human being who, like the Samaritan in the parable, seeks simply to live him as a friend in his time of deepest need.
3. The volunteers are carefully selected for their personal qualities and natural aptitude for the work, without regard to their creed, colour, politics, age, sex or status.
4. The volunteers in each Centre recognized as a Branch of The Samaritans work under the supervision of a *Director* (or Chairman) and other Leaders, who are advised by Consultants with medical or other professional qualifications, so that the highest standards of caring may be achieved. Consultants may also assist in the selection and preparation of volunteers and give help to clients.
5. In countries where the telephone is generally available, an easily remembered telephone number is advertised by each Branch, in addition to its address, to enable swift (and if the caller desires, anonymous) contact to be made with the minimum of effort on the part of the caller.
6. The Samaritans' receive callers in person at their Centre, and invite telephone callers who likely to benefit to meet a Samaritan face to face. Callers are free of they wish to have contact only by telephone or by letter.
7. The Samaritans' primary and overriding concern is for those who seem to be in immediate danger or taking their own lives.
8. Samaritans engage in long term as well as short-term prevention of suicide by befriending despairing and lonely people who do not seem to be suicidal at the time when they seek help. Or who seem unlikely for conscientious or other reasons, ever to commit suicide.
9. If a caller is concerned about another person. The Samaritans try to support him in his anxiety and to suggest ways of obtaining help for his friend. The Samaritans do not intrude upon persons who have not sought their help directly, unless an identified responsible person informs them of the need of someone who is too young or old or ill to ask in person, in which case they may make a tentative offer of help.
10. The Samaritans do not permit their immediate availability in cases of a suicidal emergency to be impeded by attention to cases of long-term chronic inadequacy, though callers in their category may be accepted as clients during a crisis.

11. The Samaritans do not flatter themselves that what they have to offer will be helpful to every caller. Those in charge of each Branch are responsible for using their human resource to the best advantage, and protecting them from being wasted by the grossly psychopathic or any others not capable of benefiting from befriending.
12. The Samaritans' service is non-medical. Callers requesting medical treatment may be helped to obtain this, and each Branch has at least one medical consultant. Usually a psychiatric. To advise those in charge of the Branch about such cases.
13. The Samaritans are not a trained casework agency, and volunteers are not permitted to attempt to do for a client in an amateur way what social workers are trained to do with professional knowledge.
14. The Samaritans are not a social welfare agency. They refer those who request material aid to the appropriate welfare services, except in countries which lack these.
15. The Samaritans are not a Christian organization. Except in the origin of the concept, Volunteers whatever their original beliefs, are strictly forbidden to make any attempt witness to convert the callers or to exploit a caller's distress by using the opportunity to witness to the volunteer's beliefs. Callers spontaneously requesting spiritual help of a particular kind are referred, with their permission, to a representative of the appropriate body, who may or may not be a member of the organization.
16. Volunteers are normally known to callers only by their Christian names or forenames and their volunteer's identification number, unless continued befriending by a chosen volunteer is arranged, when one of the persons in charge of the Branch decides what other information may be given to the client concerned and whether hospitality may be offered by the volunteer in his or her home.
17. The fact that a person has sought the help of The Samaritans, and everything he has confided in them, is confidential within the organization. All communications from callers which could reasonably be regarded as of a highly secret nature, and those relating to criminal acts, are received in the strictest confidence and are not revealed to any person outside the organization without the caller's express permission, not to persons within the organization who are not involved, except the Director. (Volunteers are not permitted to accept confidences if a condition is made that not even the Director should be informed of them.)
18. The caller remains at all times in charges of his own destiny and is free to reject the help that is offered and to break contact without fear of being sought out against his will, even if it is felt certain that he intends to take his own life or to commit some other act which The Samaritans would deprecate. A volunteer in contact (whether by telephone or fact to face) with a caller judged to be in some danger of suicide is encouraged to seek the caller's permission for a discreet approach to be made to him subsequently to ask how he is, and

to record the fact if permission is granted. In such cases, 'follow up' is clearly not against the client's will.

19. The various Branches of The Samaritans are banded together in a legally constituted Association whose Council of Management represents all the Branches and reserves to itself the appointment of the person in charge of each Branch, responsible for seeing that the above mentioned principles are observed.
20. Only the Council may authorize departures from these principles, for instance, by permitting new Branch to offer a limited section for service for a period, or overseas Branches to use some other names than the council; and only the Council may from time to time revise these principles.